

**(Im)politeness in email communication: how English speakers and Chinese  
speakers negotiate meanings and develop intercultural (mis)understandings**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how people from different backgrounds negotiate meanings in interactions. In particular, this study looks at the way in which Chinese and English speakers employ (im)politeness strategies in their emails to develop intercultural understanding. From a theoretical perspective, this thesis contributes to the discussions of intercultural communication in relation to the negotiation of (im)politeness meaning. From a pedagogic perspective, the thesis reveals the potential for using email to experience culture as a process of meaning negotiation and construction and has relevance to teachers of EFL in Taiwan and other language teaching contexts.

In an attempt to investigate discursively the negotiation of meaning in email interaction, ethnographically-informed discourse analysis is employed. It considers such issues as the role of email technology, the cultural background of participants and other contextualised factors in creating intercultural (mis)understandings. The interplay between the computer-mediated communication, speech acts and (im)politeness are explored by using the analytical frameworks of Hymes' ethnography of communication, Searle's speech act theory (1969) and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987).

This research shows that '(im)politeness' is not a stable construct. Rather, it is constantly (re)negotiated by the interactants, who take into account the relevant contextualisation cues. It finds that the functions and (im)politeness meanings of speech acts can vary from situations to situations. The interactants' interpretations of an act can be influenced by the collective references drawn from their past interactions, which include the norms of interactions, interpersonal relationships, and the interactants' background information. In this sense, the linguistic meaning of an act does not always correspond to its actual meaning in a context. In addition, this research finds that the computer-mediated paralinguistics, such as emoticons and written out laughter, are also important in realising (im)politeness intent and developing intercultural understanding in emails.

This thesis ends with possibilities for implementing email in language teaching and learning. It is suggested that email provides opportunities for language learners to experience the pragmatic aspects of language use in interactions and develop intercultural understanding through the process of email correspondences with people from different backgrounds. This thesis also proposes further research on the pragmatic functions of the paralinguistic cues in computer-mediated communication.

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## **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

CMC	Computer-mediated communication
CP	Cooperative principle
DCT	Discourse Completion Test
FTA	Face-threatening act
FTF	Face-to-Face
IC	Intercultural communication
IP	Irony principle
PP	Politeness principle
H	Hear
S	Speaker

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background and Motivation**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the rationale behind this research and present the research aims of this study. This thesis aims to describe and analyse intercultural communication between Chinese and English speakers via email.

With the advent of the Internet, the opportunities for people from different locations to interact have greatly increased. Computer-mediated communication has transcended geographical boundaries and time differences and allowed people from different countries to interact and communicate with little or no hassle. The computer-mediated form of communication has significantly impacted on today's world. People make friends in online chat rooms, do business via email, search information or play online games with people from the other end of the world. All these online activities have become a very important part of our everyday life.

People no longer need to travel a long way to another country in order to interact with the local people. Intercultural communication, therefore, is drawing more and more attention. Acknowledging the increasingly important role of intercultural communication in today's world, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has specifically made it one of the 2009-2012 educational goals to broaden students' horizons and understanding of the world. The educators in Taiwan recognise the need to prepare students for the globalised and multicultural environment. However, Grosse (2002:22-23) points out that "learning how to handle the technology and dealing with different cultures can pose the biggest challenges." This is to say that the convenience brought by the computer-mediated communication does not guarantee effective intercultural communication. Thus, it is worth exploring what constitutes a successful

intercultural communication mediated by the new technology.

Spitzberg (1988) points out that “[c]ompetent communication is interaction that is perceived as effective in fulfilling certain rewarding objectives in a way that is also appropriate to the context in which the interaction occurs” (p.68). In simple terms, an effective intercultural communication calls for the interactants’ awareness of what is appropriate and inappropriate in the context. Hence, this thesis attempts to explore the interplay of computer-mediated communication and intercultural understanding.

Even though this research does not specifically aim to test students’ language and intercultural competence, it wishes to consider the pedagogic possibilities of using computers to raise intercultural awareness. For this reason, this research set up an intercultural communication project which invited Chinese and English speakers to exchange emails. It aimed to explore how intercultural understandings between Chinese and English speakers were developed via email. Chinese and English speakers were chosen to be the focus of this research because this setup reflects the typical pedagogical arrangements for teachers in Taiwan wanting their students to come into contact with English speakers. Even though at the beginning the Chinese and English speakers, who did not know each other, were paired up by me, their interactions were entirely their own. The research project design will be explained in further detail in the methodology chapter.

In the research project, I was interested in the meaning negotiation between the participants’ in their emails. To be more specific, the online intercultural communication in this study involves various concepts important in language teaching leaning, namely ‘culture’, ‘communication’, ‘computer-mediated communication’ and ‘language use’ (see Literature Review). In other words, knowledge of intercultural communication can be further understood through the investigations of people’s email

interactions.

The negotiation of meanings between the interactants is explored by investigating the speech acts and (im)politeness strategies in the pairings' email correspondence. The discursive analysis of meaning negotiation takes into account the relevant factors, such as topic, norms of interaction, relationship, interactants' backgrounds and considers the interrelationships between interactants (see Hymes, 1974). Thus, this thesis is interdisciplinary in the sense that it works within the specific theoretical framework of the ethnography of communication, intercultural communication and computer-mediated communication while performing linguistic and discourse analyses using speech act and politeness theory.

Although intercultural communication has been investigated in many empirical studies, little work has been carried out on the rules of appropriateness in e-mail communication (cf. Hymes, 1971). The notion of politeness to intercultural communication is significant because "in studying politeness, we are automatically studying social interaction and the appropriacy of certain modes of behaviour in accordance with socio-cultural conventions" (Watts, Ide & Ehlich, 1992: 6). While agreeing with Watts et al., I also consider the study of politeness is a useful means of understanding how people from different national backgrounds regulate social interaction via email and negotiated intercultural (mis)understanding during the interactions. The negotiation of face between the interactants links basic face needs to explicit (im)politeness strategies with consideration of the cultural, social and specific context of the interaction. In order to tackle the complexity of intercultural communication and computer-mediated communication, ethnographically-informed discourse analysis is introduced (see Chapter 3). The research design contributes to the knowledge of how an ethnographic approach can be used for email discourse.



From a theoretical perspective, this thesis contributes to the discussions of intercultural communication in relation to the negotiation of (im)politeness meaning. From a pedagogic perspective, it is my intention to explore how cultural understanding can be negotiated by the exchange of emails. It is hoped that the insights gained from the participants' meaning making processes could contribute to the understanding of intercultural communication and inform EFL practitioners who wish to increase learners' intercultural awareness by using email intercultural exchanges in their pedagogy and curriculum.

## **1.2 Research aims and research questions**

This research aims to gain understanding about how polite and impolite meaning is negotiated in email intercultural interactions. The interplay between computer-mediated communication, culture and language is explored by unpacking the meaning of (im)politeness carried out in speech acts.

The meaning of (im)politeness in this research is explored by means of such qualitative data as pre-survey questionnaire, email exchanges, e-journals and e-interviews. By carrying out an ethnographically-informed discourse analysis of the participants' email correspondence, this research attempts to "look beyond the texts of interaction to the broader contextual dynamics that shape and are shaped by those texts" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p. 15). In other words, it intends to explore the meaning in the participants' emails not only by analysing the syntactic construction of the email sentences, but it also looks at the relevant factors which come to influence and/or form the intended meaning in the sentence, such as the interactants' relationship, norms of interaction and topic.

The aims of the research are listed below:

1. To demonstrate how Chinese and English speakers carry out their intercultural communication via email.
2. To identify the elements which influence the development of intercultural understanding in emails.
3. To show how the meaning of (im)politeness is formed, negotiated and transmitted via email.

In light of the research aims, the specific questions addressed by the thesis are presented below.

1. What is the content and themes covered in e-mail exchanges between the speakers of Chinese and English in this intercultural email communication project?

This question aims to find what topics and information are discussed in the participants' email correspondence. Unlike face-to-face interaction, the participants' gender, age and physical appearances are not immediately apparent in their email interactions. Thus, I wish to see how the participants begin to know one another as individuals who are native to another country. In addition, by looking at the content of the email interaction, I wish to see how they form understandings of the other person's background, such as family, hobbies, likes, dislikes, interests, education or cultural values. Since this is an ethnographically-informed discourse study, it is essential for me to form interpretations based on the investigation of rich and in-depth data. Thus, the information obtained about the participants could be used as the focus of the analysis, or it could also be used as additional references to support the data analysis.

2. What are the salient speech act(s) emerging in the communicative events and how are they used to negotiate the communicative goals?

The answers to this question are important for the following reasons. First, speech acts are considered as the basic unit of investigation of a communication (see Austin 1962; Searle, 1969; 1975). The linguistic analysis of speech acts could provide opportunities to allow patterns, if any, to be revealed during interactions. More importantly, in analysing the speech acts performed in a particular context, it is hoped that more contextualised explanations of the functions of speech acts can be provided. The contextualised understanding of the speech acts could reveal language function(s) in a given context. The answer to this question may thus be useful in clarifying the factors which could influence or even change the function of speech acts. Second, since the interaction between participants will take place in the email system, the computer-mediated features of email which associate with the writer's linguistic performance must also need to be taken into account. In addition, I am interested to see how computer-mediated features such as emoticons and animations, if any, work in email intercultural communication.

3. How does the meaning of (im)politeness manifest itself in intercultural email communication?

Email interaction is different from real time face-to-face interaction in that it lacks the latter's non-verbal cues (i.e. facial expression, tone, gesture). Thus, I am interested to find how the interactants negotiate their (im)politeness meaning with each other in their email interactions. Furthermore, I would also like to find out what computer-mediated features are employed in the email exchanges in order to form intercultural understanding.

4. To what extent can email contribute to the intercultural communication and understanding?

Fundamentally, this question is intended to find how email could contribute to the development of intercultural awareness in foreign language education, which is closely related to the research goal. The asynchronous nature of email intercultural communication allows time for the participants to compose their responses. Could it become an advantage for language learners as they establish their understanding of people from another country? This question seeks answers from the observations of the participants' emails and collections of feedback from their e-journals and e-interviews.

### **1.3 An overview of the research project**

For this research project, nine Chinese speakers from Taiwan and nine English from America and Britain exchanged emails for a period of three months. During the project time, other qualitative data were collected, namely the pre-survey questionnaires, e-journals and e-interviews. The data were analysed primarily on the basis of the theoretical frameworks of speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) with some additional references to other related empirical studies. The investigation of email interactions also considered issues such as the role of this particular mediating technology (email), the cultural background of participants and other contextual factors.

This research proposes to investigate how intercultural understanding is formed in interactions. It is my view that culture, communication and language are interrelated elements. They are of equal importance in this intercultural communication research. In this sense, culture involves the embedded values which

may or may not influence people's online communication and language performance. Thus culture is not considered as a static notion, but a concept emerging in the interplay between cultural values, communication and language display. Based on this conceptualisation of culture, the only way to gain more in-depth understanding of the meaning of culture is through the investigation of the actual interactions. Rampton et al. (2004:2) also propose that the close analysis of language use reveals "both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity." In line with this view, I want to unpack the process of meaning formations through the investigations of the participants' email correspondences.

The pragmatic aspect of language use has attracted many research attentions since the late 60s (see Austin, 1969; Searle, 1969; Hymes, 1974). Language study begins to move beyond linguistics into meta-communication. It has become a research interest to discover the interrelated aspects of words and functions. This pragmatic view of language use has, since then, been extensively investigated within the field of politeness (for example, Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, among the politeness research, there seems to be a difficulty in reaching a consensus on what is considered "polite" or "impolite". Meier (1995:345) argues that the state of politeness research still shows a "disconcerting amount of divergence and lack of clarity concerning the meaning of politeness". The difficulty in having consensus on (im)politeness arises because the judgment of what is polite or impolite is subject to change in different situations with different people. Spencer-Oatey (2002:530) also suggests that "linguistic politeness needs to be studied within the situated social psychological context in which it occurs." Thus, in order to keep open to the interpretation of potential meanings, the term of (im)politeness is used in this research

to refer to acts which are not yet clear in their impolite or polite intentions. It is proposed that the meaning of (im)politeness should not be determined on the basis of linguistic performance, but should be considered as an ongoing process which is negotiated and understood by the participants who are involved in the interaction. Such a perspective calls for a methodological approach which could give more comprehensive view into a dialectic event. Based on this research rationale, this research brings together an ethnographic approach with the discourse analysis of speech acts and (im)politeness. The integrated analytical approach aims to examine how Chinese speakers and English speakers negotiate the meaning of (im)politeness and develop intercultural understandings via email. This will be described further in chapter 3.

#### **1.4 The context of the study**

##### **1.4.1 Intercultural communication via email**

The Internet since its advent has become a popular channel of interpersonal communication. It allows communication across time and space (Iivonen et al., 1998). Among all the Internet activities, email is currently one of the most widespread methods of virtual communication. Email, an asynchronous method of communication, has enabled people from different geographical areas to talk to each other across space and time. With email surpassing telephone conversation and even face-to-face conversation as a frequent tool of communication among some occupational groups (American Management Association International, 1998), numerous studies have been carried out in an effort to explore the potential of using email exchanges for language teaching. For example, Kern (1995a) and Soh & Soon (1991) used email exchanges to increase learners' cultural knowledge. In these two

studies it was found that electronic devices, which make connections with the cultures of the target language, can assist learning about the target culture. Some qualitative studies have been conducted to see the types of reading and writing processes which occur in online environments. Those studies have indicated that students show more progress in negotiating meanings when writing emails to real recipients (Warschauer, 1999; Liaw & Johnson, 2000; Meskill & Krassimira, 2000). Email exchanges have proved to be beneficial to the students because they encourage students to produce more comprehensible output in order to reach mutual understanding with their correspondents. Despite the increasing amount of research on email exchange language projects, most of them are only designed to discover whether the language learners' culture knowledge and intercultural awareness are developed through the email interaction. Yet the process of meaning negotiation between the interactants has rarely been addressed.

In order to gain more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication via email, analysis should focus on the individuals' interactions and explore how individuals negotiate meaning in email interactions. "Articulating the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup and cultural levels of analysis is ultimately necessary to develop a comprehensive theory of interpersonal communication that cuts across ethnic and cultural boundaries" (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988: 234). Larina also proposes that "[s]uccess in intercultural communication depends greatly on the understanding of communicative intentions of interlocutors and the pragmatic meaning of their utterances" (Larina, 2008 :33).

Thus, in intercultural studies, there has been an increasing tendency to investigate culture at the individual level instead of that of the nationally-based culture. It has been argued that the nationally-based culture is inadequate for

explaining the complexities of culture and communication (see Schwartz, 1990; Singelis, 1994; Kim, 1995). Kim argues that “[t]he use of culture as a post hoc explanation of observed differences does little to help us understand the underlying causes of behaviour” (Kim, 1995: 149). The investigation of communication between individuals from different national backgrounds could provide more satisfactory explanations of the issues emerging in their cultural encounters.

This thesis aims to shed light on intercultural communication by looking at the interactions between the participants’ email correspondences. The discursive investigation of the participants’ email interactions could provide some explanations to how people from different national backgrounds come to form their intercultural (mis)understanding. Kim also suggests that “cultural and individual levels are interrelated” (Kim, 1995:150). Similarly, Holmes also states, “[m]eanings and intentions are jointly and progressively negotiated between the individuals involved in a given interaction” (Holmes, 2003a:11). Thus, this study looks at intercultural communication through the investigation of interpersonal transactions between Chinese and English speakers in email communication. In addition to the sentence’s semantic meaning, the (im)politeness meaning of the sentence is further explored for its pragmatic function in the context. Closely tied up with the development of interpersonal communication and relationship, the elements which constitute (im)politeness in the email interaction were investigated.

#### **1.4.2 The context of the research project**

For the purpose of exploring intercultural communication via email, an intercultural communication project was set up in 2006 to recruit volunteer participants. The participants were divided into two groups – Chinese speakers and



English speakers.

All the participants volunteered. The Chinese-speaking participants come from Taiwan. They were recruited from their schools' bulletin boards and the online Bulletin Board System (known as BBS). In Taiwan, the official language is Mandarin Chinese and English is taught as a mandatory subject from secondary school (English has become a mandatory subject from Grade 5 in primary school since 2001). Since the Taiwanese participants were either university students or university graduates, most of them had been learning English for more than six years. The participants included both genders, with an age range of 20 to 25 years (see Chapter 3).

The participants from the English-speaking group were recruited from language schools, online Chinese learning forums and through word of mouth in the UK and US. Most of the participants had graduated from school and were self-studying or attending language classes to learn Chinese for personal interest. The age range was between 19 and 62. I discuss the participants' backgrounds and the recruitment procedures further in the methodology chapter.

Since the interactions all took place in computer-mediated discourse, the research site is an online setting, where the participants could operate their email interactions from their ends of the computer network anywhere in the world. The participants made contact and were contacted through the use of email. The details of this are discussed later in chapter 3. In light of the research aims to explore the meaning negotiation by email, the investigation focuses only on the computer-mediated context, rather than the physical context where the participants composed and typed their emails. It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss the environmental factors for the participants as they read and wrote their emails, unless they stated these factors in the text. The purpose of the research was to unpack the

complex meaning of intercultural communication from a discursive and interactive perspective. Within the plethora of information transmitted in the email exchanges, I aim to focus on investigating the negotiation of (im)politeness meaning in the email correspondences. This is because “[p]oliteness seems to be a social value that occurs in all civilized societies, even through the social norms relating to what is and what is not considered polite behaviour may vary across cultures” (House & Kasper, 1981:157). I designed and conducted the present research with this research focus in mind.

In the next section, I give an overview of the thesis, which introduces its structures.

### **1.5 Overview of the thesis**

The present chapter has introduced the research aims and research questions. Broadly speaking, this research is concerned with the way in which intercultural understanding and meaning are negotiated via email. Specifically, this research aims to investigate how the meaning of (im)politeness is manifested by the interactants in their email. This research developed its analytical framework on the basis of two theories – speech act theory and politeness theory. The two approaches shaped the structure of the data analysis and are not used discretely. Theoretically and methodologically informed by the ethnography, speech act and politeness analysis are integrated with ethnographic approaches to studying communication. **Chapter 2** then gives a detailed discussion of the key notions in this research, namely, online intercultural communication, speech act theory, politeness theory and the related empirical research. Following the literature review of the key concepts, the methodological framework and the actual design of the research project are

introduced in **Chapter 3**. Ethnographically-informed discourse analysis is used as the main theoretical and methodological frameworks of this research. Ethnography is enhanced by the speech act and politeness analyses. The research methods of this study include collecting the participants' email entries, pre-survey questionnaires, discourse completion tests, e-journals and e-interviews. From **Chapter 4 to Chapter 6**, I investigate the interactants' email using politeness and speech act analysis. In order to explain the functions of the speech acts in the email, I resort to other contextualised information, such as the communicative event, the interactants' backgrounds, their relationship, the norms of interaction. In this way the meaning of (im)politeness is determined by the cross-referencing of the elements involved in the email interactions.

In order to provide a comprehensive discussion of the analysis, **Chapter 7** sums up and discusses the phenomena which appear salient across all data. The observations of the data analysis then lead to the responses to the research questions. Finally, **Chapter 8** presents the conclusions along with some limitations of the research. This chapter also includes a summary of the key issues which emerged in the data analysis and their pedagogical implications for foreign language teaching and learning. Last but not least, some issues which have been touched on but not explored in detail are suggested for future online intercultural research.

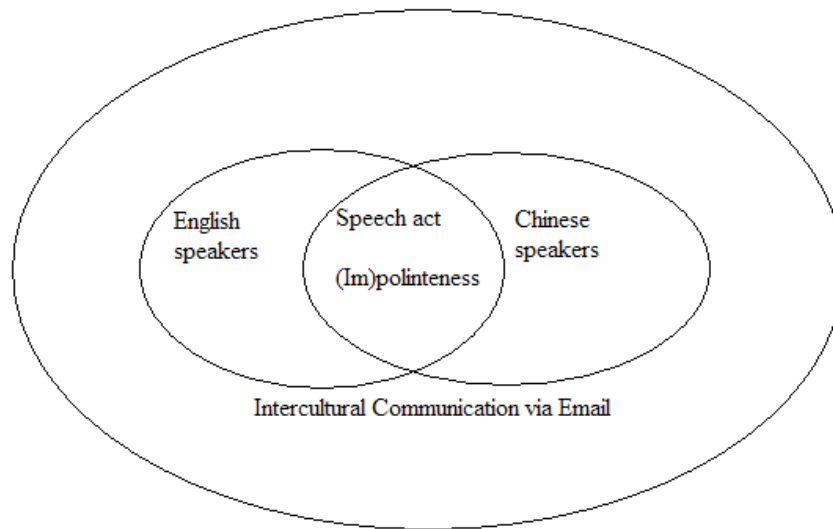
## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the key concepts which lead to the development and investigation of this research. It will discuss the five interrelated areas listed below. In 2.2, a definition of intercultural communication is presented. Intercultural communication mediated with computers is also discussed. In 2.3, I give a historical account of speech act theory and then review some of its empirical work in cross-cultural studies. In 2.4, politeness theory is addressed along with its specific contributions and criticisms. In order to make up for the inadequacy entailed in politeness theory, the analysis of (im)politeness in this research, draws on an ethnographic approach to communication and theoretical views of speech act theory.

The interdependent and interrelated relationships of the key concepts in this study are shown in Figure 2.1. The two smaller circles represent the two language groups under investigation. The overlapping area indicates the email correspondence between the Chinese and English speakers. All the interactions occurred in the virtual world, mediated by computers. Thus, the outer big circle shows the interaction which took place in the online setting, mediated by email. The interplay between speech act, politeness and computer-mediated communication is discussed below.



**Figure 2.1: Conceptual framework of intercultural communication via email**

The conceptualisation of this framework is based on my view of meaning as co-constructed in interactions. Thus, the investigation explores the meaning of intercultural communication by seeing the process of transmitting (im)politeness meanings via email. This view is in line with Kramsch's proposition which states that "culture is constructed across day-to-day dialogues, through the choices of frames and footings that speakers adopt vis-à-vis their own and others' discourse and through the way they collaborate in the necessary facework within a variety of discourse types" (Kramsch, 1998:51). Taking meaning as a discursive construct, the interactions between the participants have been made the focus of the investigation. In the interactive analysis, speech acts are used as the basic unit of analysis. The analysis of speech acts provides more understanding of the semantic meaning of the sentence in the overall context. A speech act can be linguistically analysed to give its pragmatic meaning. The analysis of speech acts is essential because of its relevancy to the (im)politeness meaning. How the (im)politeness is conveyed through different speech

acts in the context is further discussed in the light of the communicative goal. I will discuss the key concepts in this thesis below.

## **2.2 Intercultural communication**

### **2.2.1 What is ‘culture’**

Before discussing the concept of intercultural communication, it is necessary to clarify the definition of culture in this research. In Chapter 1, I addressed the inclination in Taiwan’s foreign language education to characterise culture as a set of static socially constructed meanings which are inherited and shared by certain group of people. Atkinson (1995:625) defines the orientation of seeing cultures “in their most typical form as geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behaviour” as a ‘received view’ of culture. A culture, in this sense, is usually categorised by the nation which exhibits it and this tends to oversimplify the essence of culture.

In studies pertaining to cultural essentialism, Hofstede’s (1980) cultural model has often been discussed. Hofstede conducted a large-scale intercultural study of IBM employees. From his findings, he formed five cultural dimensions. But his model is now criticised for making over-generalised conclusions on the basis of company workers alone. I will briefly illustrate some of the criticisms about his theory by providing two of the cultural dimensions that Hofstede presents – individualism/collectivism and high/low power distance cultures. Hofstede’s cultural model polarizes individualism and collectivism. Western societies are categorised as individualist ones in which individuals value their own independence, whereas Asian societies are more inclined to collectivism, where interdependence is an important

cultural trait. Furthermore, Hofstede finds that cultures which are high in power-distance tend to centralize power, whereas low power-distance cultures prefer flat organizational structures. High power-distance cultures (e.g. China) are more used to hierarchical systems. However, such binary typology is considered problematic, since no society is all one thing or another (Greenfield, 1994). Attempting to apply a typology to one society will fix it with a single image and overlook other meaningful traits in the society. Abdelnour-Nocera (2002) points out the insufficiency in Hofstede's cultural models: they omit "qualitative specific dimensions that don't fit certain preestablished parameters" (p.516). Greenfield suggests that each society "strikes a particular balance between individual and group, between independence and interdependence" (Greenfield, 1994: 4).

Hall's low/high context culture theory is also inclined to cultural essentialism, which imposes cultural images rather stiffly upon societies. The theory refers to the degree to which speakers rely on factors other than explicit speech to convey their messages (Hall, 1966). High-context means that "most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976:79). In comparison, communication in a low-context society is "the mass of information [being] vested in the explicit code" (ibid: 70). In low-context communication, less explicit meaning is uttered. Thus, in order to get the meanings across, the interactants need to be equipped with sufficient social and background knowledge of the context of the interactions. Chinese and Japanese cultures are frequently labelled high-context cultures, in which more background knowledge is required in order to convey the unuttered message (see Buragga, 2002; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Choe, 2001).

Holliday (1999) argues that it is this kind of "culturist reduction ... which leads

to an exaggeration of those differences”. Similarly, Scollon & Scollon (1995) point out the possible fallacy of bringing such high- or low-context cultural stereotyped assumptions to intercultural studies. They suggest that the word ‘stereotyping’ is a synonym for ‘overgeneralization’. The assumptions that certain characteristics are carried in people from certain countries may “blind us to other, equally important aspects of a person’s behaviour” (Scollon & Scollon, 1995:156). Cultural essentialism has been problematised by anthropologists. More radically, this view of culture is held not to be helpful in the investigation of intercultural communication in the online setting, where the interactants’ national identities are not immediately apparent and the physical context of the interaction is missing.

Acknowledging the need to expand on the received view of culture, the trend of seeing culture not as a monolithic entity but as hybrid in nature has emerged. Holliday (1999) distinguishes the two disparate views of culture into two paradigms – large and small culture. He sees large culture as a culturist reduction which leads to “overgeneralization and otherization of ‘foreign’ educators, students and societies” (Holliday, 1999:237-238). In contrast to large culture, Holliday proposes the notion of small culture. The small culture paradigm “attaches culture to small groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour” (ibid.:237).



	Small cultures	Large cultures
Character	➤ non-essentialist, ➤ relating to cohesive behaviour in activities within any social grouping	➤ essentialist ➤ 'culture' as essential features of ethnic national or international group
Relations	➤ No necessary subordination to or containment within large cultures, therefore no onion-skin	➤ Sub-cultures are contained within and subordinate to large cultures through onion-skin relationship
Research orientation	➤ Interpretive ➤ Interpreting emergent behaviour within any social grouping	➤ Prescriptive ➤ Specific ethnic, national and international groups have different 'cultures'.

Table 2.2 culture paradigm (Adapted from Holliday, 1999:241)

The focus of the investigation of 'culture' in this research is more inclined to Holliday's small culture. Nonetheless, this research does not deny the influence and interrelationship between national-based and small cultures. However, it appears obvious that 'culture' of a nation is created and maintained by its people. Culture, itself, is not a static and solid object to be acquired. Rather, it is normally used as an abstract notion to describe the norms or rituals of a specific society. Researchers have argued foreign language teaching studies are prone to accept culture as an unproblematic concept (see Guest, 2006; Atkinson, 1999, Holliday, 1999). It is believed that the simplification of binary concept of culture (East/West) creates "a polarity that exaggerates reality" (Guest, 2006). Kramsch also points out the fallacy of equating cultures with nations: "every culture is heterogeneous, i.e. it is composed of a variety of subcultures, and every situation elicits a variety of responses, even within the same national culture" (Kramsch, 1998: 50). The above arguments point to the fact that the over-generalised and simplified view of culture could lead to cultural reductionism, seeing a nation's culture as static and unchangeable. In my view, it is only by unpacking the meaning construction of individuals that one gains more

comprehensive understanding of their culture. Crane further points out that modern societies are 'notable for their lack of cultural coherence' or 'loose boundedness' (Crane 1994: 3). Expanding Crane's view, Holliday maintains that "the world is becoming an increasingly cosmopolitan, multi-cultural place where cultures are less likely to appear as large coherent geographical entities" (Holliday, 1999:244). It should be noted that although Holliday pinpoints the important role of 'small culture', he does not deny cultures based on nations. He stresses the essential role of small culture only because many people accept large culture as the answer to cultural variability. For instance, national view of culture is still centrally important in EFL and pedagogy. Despite the problems it may entail, culture, in general, is still introduced as a national attribute in the classroom. This is because national culture is easier to identify since it tends to highlight the differences between nations and provide more specific descriptions of the values held within a society. This view of culture remains valid because it represents a partial truth about the world. However, it should be recognised that culture should not be understood only on the basis of large culture.

Williams (1977:63) proposes that culture should be considered an 'interrelated configuration of archaic, residual and emergent cultures'. Jayasuriya (1990) says that "culture is not a fixed entity but a mixture of past present and indeed future concoctions" (Jayasuriya, 1990:14). He further suggests that culture should be regarded only as the blueprint but not the ultimate explanation of individual behaviour (ibid). This way of conceiving human acts as an assembly of social, cultural and contextual elements echoes my own. The variability of human interactions makes them difficult to deduce from a single 'reality'. This view is particularly prominent for online communication. The intercultural communication mediated by the new

technology has exerted a dramatic influence on cultural studies. The unique nature of computer-mediated setting has provided a virtual platform where cultures meet, clash, negotiated and redefined. In order to better understand the tension between large and small culture in online communication, this research considers culture as a process of meaning construction, specifically in the email interactions between people from different national backgrounds.

As the above discussion shows, these researchers all seem to indicate the danger of applying existing cultural model frameworks to understanding complex and dynamic cultural phenomena. Acknowledging the complexity of the notion of 'culture', Goodenough recommends "[thinking] of both culture and language as rooted in human activities (rather than in societies) and as pertaining to groups ... the cultural makeup of a society is thus to be seen not as a monolithic entity determining the behaviour of its members, but a *mélange* of understandings and expectations regarding a variety of activities that serve as guides to their conduct and interpretation" (Goodenough,1994:266-7). Similarly, Guest (2002) proposes that we should "focus on the properties of individuals or character types rather than cultures at large. The linguistic dynamics should be adjusted according to the nature of the interaction (individual/small groups) and not in order to conform to an abstract, generalised, formula ('culture')".

Goodenough and Guest's explications point out the interactive and emerging nature of culture, which is formed and reformed during the process of interactions. Their views of culture are particularly helpful in understanding 'culture' in a virtual world where people from different geographical locations constantly communicate. With only a few computer strokes, anyone can find a flood of information about a place which s/he has never visited or chat with a total stranger from the other side of

the world. Not that one's values or behaviour will certainly be changed by frequent contact with people from different cultural backgrounds, but it cannot be denied that the increasing online intercultural communication has made the definition of 'culture' more dynamic than ever.

Given the complexity of culture, Knoblauch (2000) asserts that, "since the culture of the world of everyday life is constructed by means of communicative acts, it is essentially a *communicative culture*" (p.25). In other words, culture is not a static concept but is interactively negotiated and shaped. Accordingly, Holliday proposes a "discourse-centred approach" to the investigation of culture: "discourse has to be considered as the concrete expression of the language-culture relationship because it is discourse that 'creates, recreates, focuses, modifies and transmits both culture and language and their interaction'" (1994:414). Using discourse analysis of culture, "anthropologists conceptualise that ever-changing 'complex whole' through which people engage in the continual process of accounting, in a mutually meaningful manner, for what they do, say and might think" (Baumann 1996:11). Baumann's view points out the dialectic and interactive aspects in culture. Guest (2002) suggests that "the method more sympathetic to psychological or small-scale interactive models would ultimately be both more accurate and productive" (2002:157).

The above researchers all seem to support a discursive and interactive investigation into culture. This approach is useful for explaining the meaning of culture in the online setting, where the interactants' genders, ethnicities, national and social backgrounds are obscured. It is only through piece by piece information provided by the interactants that one can begin to develop understanding of others. In accordance with this line of argument, the present study has based its investigation of culture on discursive construction of meaning in the context. This methodological

approach is termed ‘ethnographically-informed discourse study’. It will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

In the next section, the notion of intercultural communication will be discussed.

### **2.2.2 Intercultural communication**

The discussion of intercultural communication will start by briefly defining the term. Gudykunst & Kim (2003:17) conceptualise the phenomenon of intercultural communication as ‘...a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures.’ In short, intercultural communication (IC) refers to communication between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Lustig & Koester (2003: 49-51) also describe IC as a “symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings”. They further illustrate that IC occurs “when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently”. Many more researchers have attempted to define ‘intercultural communication’, but they seem to reach no consensus on what people mean by the idea of culture, in the first place. Scollon & Scollon state that “[t]he word “culture” often brings up more problems than it solves” (1995:125). They point out that although we try to view each cultural group with its historical and cultural background, we should not overgeneralise the cultural traits. In intercultural discourse above all, communication is between ‘individuals’ but not between ‘cultures’. In this sense, Scollon & Scollon (2001:138) suggest that “cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do.” Thus, “all communication is interpersonal communication” (ibid,1995:125).

Like Scollon & Scollon, I believe that the communication between people from

different national backgrounds can include many topics in their interaction, including national cultural aspects. However, cultural factors do not monopolise the interaction. The topics chosen, norms of interaction, gender and even the medium of communication can become critical in intercultural contacts. Thus, Ess & Sudweeks (2005) say that intercultural communication research should reflect: “(a) a multitude of “cultures” and (b) “culture” as a series of practices and habits that are fluid, dynamic and changing, especially as *generated* by intercultural communication online.”

In this study, the term ‘intercultural communication’ is used as an umbrella term to describe the communication between people from different national cultural backgrounds. But the term itself does not attempt to put more weight on ‘culture’ than on any other elements in communication. More specifically, I draw inferences from the contextualised factors emerging during ‘intercultural communication’ between English and Chinese speakers. Although defining intercultural communication rather loosely here, in order to avoid confining the observation and interpretation to ‘cultural’ aspects alone, I still believe that cultural elements are embedded in most of our communication. In fact, I consider that cultural elements and other contextualised factors are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the existing national culture views and emerging values and norms in interactions are informed and influenced by one another in different situations.

Some researchers have termed the ability to communicate successfully with people from other cultures ‘intercultural competence’. The increasing focus on raising one’s intercultural awareness and, at the same time, retaining one’s own identity has been discussed in numerous studies (e.g., Brislin, 1990; Burwitz-Melzer, 2001). For instance, in Burwitz-Melzer’s study, a story about a family of illegal migrants was

introduced to a group of German secondary-school students. The story had no title and no ending. The students, with only the information they had learnt from the story itself, had to choose a suitable title and write its ending themselves. From the students' opinions of the story and interpretations, the author concludes that "fragments of the values and opinions they hold from their own cultural experience seep into their discussions and written contributions" (Burwitz-Melzer, 2001:42). By expressing their attitudes and opinions, the author believes that students explored and made contact with Mexican culture through this foreign migrant family, whilst at the same time discovering more about their own positions. Another kind of intercultural awareness training was conducted by Nixon & Bull (2005), who tried to find whether increasing cultural awareness in nonverbal communication styles leads improved perceptual accuracy between cultures. The results of this study suggest that appropriate training can improve students' cross-cultural awareness.

From the studies discussed above, it seems reasonable to conclude that intercultural communication training has become increasingly important in today's world. The trend of intercultural awareness has made a great impact on the field of foreign language education. Sercu (2004) states that the "objective of foreign language teaching is now ... 'intercultural competence'" (Sercu, 2004:115). Agar (1994) also states that language and culture are essentially inseparable and mutually constructive. There is little doubt that the development of intercultural competence is becoming increasingly important today. It is particularly needed, since the swift development of new technologies has made communication between geographically different people easier than ever. Hart (2001) points out that "[o]ne of the newly and rapidly developing telecommunication technologies, the Internet, is bringing the next wave of increased contact". However, the study of intercultural communication has

not yet caught up with this new technological trend. Most of the studies of online communication seem to take the Internet and computers as media of communication rather than seeing them as elements which influence communication. The role of computer-mediated discourse has been, by and large, neglected in investigations of interpersonal and intercultural communication. In the next section, I discuss further the interplay between intercultural communication and computer-mediated communication.

### **2.2.3 Intercultural Computer-Mediated Communication**

With the technological advance of electronic mail, online instant messages, the Bulletin Board System (BBS) and web conferencing, people from all over the world can now express ideas and make contact with one another at any time through virtual activity. This form of communication is called computer-mediated communication (hereafter, CMC). CMC, “communication that take place between human being via the instrumentality of computers”, has changed the significance of space, time and physical contact (Herring, 1996:1).

CMC has recently become an important way of communication. According to the survey from Internet World Stats, the average number of Internet users grew from 304 million in 2000 to 888 million in March 2005. The growing impact of Internet activities on our world is evident. Metz (1994) suggests that CMC “is a field of theoretical study in its own right, not merely a channel to study within other theoretical contexts” (p.33). Agreeing with Metz’s point, I also hold that computer-mediated communication has indeed gradually taken a more important place in the research field.



Studies have shown the benefits of computer-mediated communication. For example, people who hesitate to express their opinions in face-to-face settings can be more willing to voice their opinions online (Harasim, 1993; Citera, 1998). Despite the important role they play in communication, however, the power of new technologies to shape and inform intercultural interaction has received little attention. Cathcart & Gumpert (1993) argue that the media component is often missing in communication studies because media such as computer communication have been mistaken for 'mass media' (p.268). But, they claim, 'media' should not be relegated solely to the category 'mass communication,' nor should it be excluded from other categories, such as interpersonal communication, group communication and public communication (p. 268). Cathcart & Gumpert (1993) suggest that bearing in mind the medium used for interpersonal communication, there should be a new typology which includes media technology (i.e. telephone, email). Acknowledging the need to see computer-mediated communication as an emerging medium for intercultural communication, Hart (1998) introduces the term 'intercultural computer-mediated communication' (ICCMC) to describe intercultural communication via the use of such technologies as email or computer conferencing. Agreeing with Hart's recognition of the interdependence of 'intercultural communication' and 'computer-mediated communication', I will continue to use 'intercultural computer-mediated communication' as a broad term to describe the participants' email interactions.

Increasing numbers of researchers have begun to examine online communication and investigate the cultural, social and political forms in computer-mediated discourse (see Jones, 1995; Herring, 1996; Hine, 2000). Among them, many adopt the positivist approach and conducted their research in a more or less experimental and comparative format, such as recording and comparing a group of people who complete a task via

computer with another group which does the same thing in a face-to-face setting. Even though the counting and correlating of various computer features in quantitative designs seem to provide a more systematic and structured analysis and comparison across settings, the validity of the outcome derived from its limited and constrained experimental design is challenged by naturalistic researchers. They argue that cultures should be studied in their own natural state, rather than under control, by experimental scenarios. Although the realistic view of naturalistic inquiry can be criticised, their perception of the ways to obtain knowledge is influential. Within naturalistic inquiry, ethnography is one of the influential research approaches to cultural studies. This research approached email communication as an ethnographic context and the participants' emails were further discussed in the light of speech act theory and politeness theory. The two theories are presented below.

### **2.3 Speech act theory**

Chailka (1994:153) defines speech acts as “the ways people use language to manage the social interaction.” This definition rightly points out the functional value of speech acts in interpersonal communication. It is to say that words do not always stand for their literal meaning, but mean different things in different situations. The study of pragmatics mainly deals with the ways in which we convey or transmit meanings with words. Speech act theory is one of the most influential areas of pragmatics. The basis of speech act theory was introduced by John L. Austin (1962) in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. He asserts that speakers must organise words in ways which can successfully convey their intended message. He states that language can be used to create obligation, to influence the actions of others and to create new social relationships. Austin's notion of utterance-as -action offered a new

insight into language studies.

Building on Austin's speech act theory, John Searle, Austin's successor, proposes "linguistic acts" as the unit of linguistic communication (see Mey, 2001: 93). Austin and Searle's work on speech acts is considered influential in the field of pragmatics. In this section, I first introduce the origin of speech act theory by looking at the work of Austin and Searle and show the relevance of their work to my own. Although some of the views from their studies were later challenged, their philosophical stance still makes great contribution to the investigation of communication to date and are still frequently cited and discussed in many speech act studies. Hence, I first present a historical overview of speech act theory. By giving its historical development, I hope to clarify how recent research in speech acts has modified and shaped it and how I came to decide on Searle's speech act taxonomies. In addition, more recent empirical work on speech acts is also discussed.

### **2.3.1 Review of speech act theory**

Speech act theory, by definition, concerns investigating acts which a speaker performs with words. This implies that the speaker intends to accomplish a goal by saying something. For example, when a speaker says, "Close the window", the speaker wishes the hearer to comply with the demand and carry out the act of closing the window. Austin first proposed speech act theory in 1962. He (1962: 94-108) identifies three distinct levels of the act occurring in an utterance:

a) Locutionary act: The meaning of the statement itself, the production of phrases with the help of a given grammar and lexicon. Locutionary acts describe the sentence's literal meaning (e.g. "It is cold in here.")

b) Illocutionary act: The contextual function of the act and the conveying of the speaker's intentions to the listener. The illocutionary act is often shown in the form of "F(p)", where 'F' is the illocutionary force and 'p' is the propositional content of the illocutionary act. Illocutionary acts focus on the forces carried with words (e.g. by telling someone "It is cold in here", someone is actually asking someone else to close the window.)

c) Perlocutionary act: what one achieves by saying something. This is the effect of the act upon the listener (e.g. someone closes the window because of someone else's statement.)

Austin's assumptions about language were later challenged on three main counts:

i) Austin defines a locutionary act as the act of using words, "as belonging to a certain vocabulary ... and as conforming to a certain grammar ... with a certain more or less definite sense and reference" (1962, pp. 92-3). His explanation may seem satisfactory when the words sufficiently describe the speaker's intention. However, in many situations, the real meaning of an utterance can be determined only by the circumstances of its utterance. For example, by saying "I'll call the police", I could mean the statement to be a warning, a prediction, or a promise.

ii) Austin's proposed speech act categories are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, his taxonomy seems to suggest that there is a one-to-one correspondence between speech acts and speech act verbs (Searle 1979; Leech 1983; Mey, 1993). In fact, they often overlap. Levinson (1981) argues that it is impossible to reduce the immense variety of surface utterance to a limited set of acts. Therefore the meaning of a sentence cannot be determined merely by the speech act categories.

iii) A perlocutionary act, according to Austin, is the effect of an illocutionary act (i.e. the light is turned off because the speaker says 'turn off the light'). However, some perlocutionary acts consist of a series of illocutionary acts. For instance, persuading your parents to buy a car for you might involve a combination of requests, promises, suggestions, etc. Only the act of requesting or promising alone may not successfully constitute a persuasion. Using this rationale, several researchers have agreed to abandon the notion of 'perlocutionary acts' altogether, since it does not seem possible to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for their successful performance (Searle, 1969; Levinson, 1983; Gu, 1993; Kurzon, 1998, Marcu, 2000). The term 'speech act' is now used exclusively to refer to the illocutionary act (Levinson, 1983: 236). In line with this trend, my view is that the distinctions of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are not particularly helpful, since the sentence function is determined not by its literal meaning but as something usually negotiated and realised between the interactants.

Developing Austin's theory and with these criticisms in mind, Searle substantially extends speech act theory. Searle proposes that the "illocutionary act is the minimal complete unit of human linguistic communication" since he believes that illocutionary acts are essentially intentional. The perlocutionary act, which is the result of the illocutionary act, may or may not be intentional. As Searle puts it, "The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence ... but rather the production of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (quoted in Mey, 2001: 93). Thus Searle suggests that the investigation of meaning should focus on the illocutionary act, which is motivated to achieve a goal, even though the result may not comply with this intention.

For example, a speaker might say “Answer the phone!” and the hearer may say, ‘I don’t want to’. In this example, although the speaker’s intention in his illocutionary act (requesting the hearer to answer the phone) is clear, the hearer refuses to comply with the request. This perlocutionary act may or may not meet the speaker’s expectations. Thus, Searle centres his speech act research on the illocutionary act and systematises five speech act categories.

<i>Assertives</i>	statements which may be judged true or false because they aim to describe a state of affairs in the world. (i.e. “Jenny is turning 12 next month.”)
<i>Directives</i>	statements that attempt to make the other person’s actions fit the propositional content (i.e. “Close the door.”)
<i>Commissives</i>	statements that commit the speaker to a course of action as described by the propositional content (i.e. “I promise I’ll be there on time.”)
<i>Expressives</i>	statements that express the “sincerity condition of the speech act” (i.e. Thank you for your help.)
<i>Declaratives</i>	statements that attempt to change the world by “representing it as having been changed” (i.e. “I pronounce you man and wife.”)

Table 2.3 Searle’s Speech Act Taxonomies

Developing the views of intentionality in speech act theory, Searle (1975) further points out the possibility for an utterance to have two illocutionary forces. He calls such acts ‘indirect speech acts’. According to him, sometimes what the speaker intends to accomplish is not overtly shown in the sentence or utterance. For instance, “could you pass the salt”, is not an enquiry about the hearer’s ability to pass the salt. In practice, it is a request for the hearer to pass the salt. Thus, the literal meaning is different from the speaker’s intended meaning. Searle suggests that understanding of the indirect meaning depends on the speaker and hearer’s mutually shared knowledge and the hearer’s rationality and inference. The use of indirect speech acts is linked with politeness purposes (Searle, 1979:48). Taking the question (Can you pass the salt) as an example, instead of using an imperative form of the sentence and requesting the

salt directly (i.e. Pass me the salt), the question formula implies that speaker is not presupposing the hearer's ability to pass the salt. Since the question formula allows the hearer to have options (hearer can comply with the request or not), the imposition on the hearer is greatly reduced.

Seeing from the above examples, it seems safe to suggest that the varied use of speech acts could result in different politeness effects. Searle's work on indirect speech acts laid the groundwork for the investigation of illocutionary acts and the syntactical forms in which they are realised.

Since speech act theory is useful for explaining the functions of utterances, it has been used extensively as a mean to investigate language use. For instance, cross-cultural researchers mainly base their investigations of language use on speech acts (see Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Wolfson, 1981; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The investigation of speech acts is used to observe and compare the diversity of actual speech acts by people from different national backgrounds. For instance, Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's study has shown that, despite excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language, second language speakers may still fail to communicate effectively. According to their research findings, the communication failure could be due to the cross-linguistic differences in speech act realization rules which, in simple terms, are the rules of language appropriacy (see Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Their findings have indicated cross-cultural variability, meaning that some speech acts may be considered polite in some cultures, but are impolite in others. In order to communicate with others, one should not neglect what is appropriate and what is inappropriate to say in certain cultural contexts. This then leads to the study of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) based their analysis of linguistic politeness on the investigation of face-threatening speech acts. In order to avoid face-threatening

situations, they characterised politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory will be discussed in more detail in 2.4.

Although Searle's work is influential and still widely used in different research disciplines, it was still criticised. The main criticism is the lack of context in his speech act research. Searle, like Austin in this context, based his studies on isolated sentences, by and large neglecting contextual factors. Furthermore, both Austin and Searle's speech act studies are conducted in English. Thus the speech act model cannot be assumed to be applicable to other cultural contexts. Wierzbicka (1985) and Koyama (1997) refer to the need to study speech acts in their cultural context. In addition, Clark (1996) argues that the speech act categories fail to account for the multi-functionality of language use. Thus Croft (1994) points out the importance of considering in their analysis not only the performance of an utterance but also the interaction of speaker and addressee.

Despite the criticisms of speech act theory, Mey argues that speech act theory does provide "(a ) kind of mini-scenario for what is happening in language interaction and ... a simple way of explaining the more or less predictable sequences of conversation" (1993:207). This is because speech act theory, though not exhaustive, can adequately work as a threshold of the investigation of language in communication and give a basic explanation of the linguistic construction of the sentences under scrutiny. I believe that since we all use words to communicate and create meanings, it is reasonable to explore the process of meaning constructions from the basic unit, which is the use of words to create meaning. Instead of knowing how many kinds of speech act there are in the world, it is more practical to see how different meanings are produced within the same set of speech acts.

Since Searle's main criticism is his lack of contextualised explanations, this



study hopes to address this shortcoming by exploring speech acts with reference to the contextualised cues (i.e. topics, relationship, communicative norm) in interactions. In particular, speech acts will be further discussed in the light of their (im)politeness meanings in the intercultural email communication. I want to explore how people from different backgrounds negotiated (im)politeness meaning via email. Many empirical studies have shown that people's reaction to the same act may vary according to their different cultural backgrounds. Keenan, for instance, argues that the way in which the speaker is expected to behave varies cross-culturally (Keenan 1976: p.68). Wolfson also points out that the realisation of speech acts usually reflects the values of the cultural group (1992, p.205). Extensive studies conducted on the realisation of various speech acts show that the functions of speech acts across national boundaries reveal differences (Coulmas, 1981; Blum-Kulka, 1991; Baba & Lian, 1992; Izaki, 2000). For example, Coulmas (1981) notes in his analysis of expressions of gratitude between Western and Japanese speakers that the Japanese ones express gratitude by saying 'I am sorry'. Influenced by the Japanese cultural background and language, the speaker uses apology here to show his/her indebtedness to the giver.

While acknowledging the shortcomings of traditional speech act studies, the present investigation of speech acts is based on actual email correspondence, taking into account the relevant factors which seem influential in the construction of meanings in email discourse. By investigating the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of the words used in emails, further embedded meanings are explored, taking into accounts the factors which influenced the interactions. Hymes (1974) also notes the need for more contextualised studies of speech acts. If speech act theory took into consideration the contextual factors involved in the interchange, such as cultural

values, settings, sequence of interactions, it would be better informed. Hymes argues that “the interaction of language and social life must encompass the multiple relations between linguistic means and social meaning. The relations within a particular community or personal repertoire are an empirical problem, calling for a mode of description that is jointly ethnographic and linguistic, conceiving ways of speaking as one among the community’s set of symbolic forms” (Hymes, 1974:31). Hymes’ statement points out that ‘speech’ is not merely a presentation of linguistic performance, but it also reveals social norms and values, and other factors related to a speech event (see Chapter 3 for more discussion on Hymes). In line with Hymes, this research investigates speech acts in relation to the factors embedded in the event.

Although the ‘culture’ element is important in intercultural communication, it is not necessarily the primary or the sole factor affecting the development of intercultural understanding. In Marquez Reiter’s study (2000), she contrasts requests and apologies between Britain and Uruguay. She pointed out that the choice of speech act forms in both Britain and Uruguay are not always the result of cultural norms, but sometimes of social distance and gender. It is extrapolated from this study that both British English speakers and Uruguayan Spanish speakers vary their ways of making requests and apologies according to the social distance between the interlocutors. The decisions of varying the use of requests and apologies in different contexts could result in different communication effects. In other words, linguistic knowledge is not necessarily enough for successful communication.

Ignorance of other relevant factors which are essential to the correspondents may result in impolite outcomes. Thus, Kasper (1989) and Schmidt & Richards (1980) propose that foreign language learning should include not only the learning of speech act categories, but also education in the politeness principles laid down in speech acts.

I look at the development of the notion of politeness in the next section. The association between speech acts and politeness strategies will be more thoroughly discussed there.

## **2.4. Politeness**

It is intended in this study to investigate how various speech acts are used to transmit (im)politeness meanings in email communication. Greater knowledge and understanding of these issues could inform interlocutors in cross-cultural communication and develop more comprehensive intercultural communication skills.

This section consists of two parts. I first introduce some of the key researchers in politeness studies. In the second part of this section, I discuss the criticisms of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory.

### **2.4.1 Politeness theory**

Within the past two decades, much attention has been paid to the phenomenon of linguistic and semantic politeness in practice. Despite the great volume of studies in politeness, however, the definition of politeness remains unclear since it often varies between people with different backgrounds. For example, a Chinese person's first response to a present is often a ritualized answer of 'no'. 'No' here is a conventional way of showing politeness, since it is considered rude to accept a present immediately, as if the recipient had taken the gift for granted (Gu, 1990). This response to an invitation may not be the same as some other cultures conceptualise it. Thus, the principle of politeness may vary from situation to situation and from culture to culture. Marquez Reiter (2000) suggests that politeness "is not a characteristic inherent to the action itself but is constituted by an interactional relationship, a relationship based

upon a standard shared, developed and reproduced by individuals within a social group” (Marquez Reiter, 2000:3). Marquez Reiter’s definition harmonises with that of Werkhofe (1992:156), who explicates politeness as “the power of a symbolic medium that, being used and shaped in acts of individual speakers, also represents social standards of how to behave or of what kind of conduct is considered ‘just and right’” (Marquez Reiter, 2000). Both researchers’ views of politeness have once again confirmed the need to contextualise investigations.

Rather than specifying a fixed definition of ‘politeness’ and labelling the rest ‘impoliteness’, it is the underlying assumption of this study that polite or impolite behaviour should be determined on the basis of the equilibrium of the interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors. A similar view is stated by Fraser & Nolen (1981). They suggest that “what makes a sentence polite and/or impolite is the conditions under which [expressions] ... are used and not the expression themselves” (cited in Marquez Reiter, 2000:28). This view of politeness is, however downplayed in many influential politeness studies. Below, I review some of the important researchers in politeness studies and discuss their theoretical constructs, with emphasis on Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory (1987), which is the main theoretical framework of the present study.

#### **2.4.1.1 Politeness Rules - Robin Lakoff**

Lakoff was one of the first to initiate research on politeness. Her theory regarding politeness is structured upon Grice’s (1975) Co-operative Principle (CP) and Maxims of Conversation. Radically Grice argues that all conversationalists have the propensity to cooperate with the other interlocutors in order to achieve effective communication. Grice postulates how “maximally effective exchange of information”

takes place by introducing the Cooperative Principle (CP), which consists of four maxims (Grice, 1989:28). They are maxim of quantity, quality, relation and manner. These maxims indicate that in order to communicate effectively, people will try to be informative, truthful, relevant and, at the same time, avoid ambiguity.

Expanding on Grice's views, Lakoff (1973) proposes three rules of politeness: 1) formality: keep aloof; 2) deference: give options and 3) camaraderie: show sympathy. Lakoff further argues that "the rules of politeness may differ dialectally in applicability, but their basic forms remain the same universally" (1973: 303). Lakoff claims that since Grice's main argument is concerned with the clarity of the conversation, Grice's maxims actually fall under Lakoff's first rule of politeness (formality). It is generally believed that, since Grice claims the universality of his conversation rules, when Lakoff points out the similarity between Grice's principles and her own politeness rules, she is also suggesting the universal applicability of her own rules.

Although Lakoff has not explicitly defined what she thinks 'politeness' is, it can be conjectured from the suggested rules of her politeness model that 'be polite' means 'think what is good for others and avoid doing those which may be damaging to others'. The problems with Lakoff's analysis of politeness, according to Brown (1976:246), are the rigidity of her account about the rules that constitutes politeness. Tannen (1984) argues that Lakoff's politeness rules cannot satisfactorily explain the complex politeness phenomenon, especially when some of the terms used in the politeness rules are not clearly defined (i.e. aloof, informal). Watts (2003) further states that, despite her effort to explain the pragmatics rules and categorize them as rules of politeness, Lakoff's theory does not explain how speakers come to form

sentences which are classified as ‘polite’. Some of the comments on Lakoff’s politeness principles have fed into later researchers, such as Geoffrey Leech.

#### **2.4.1.2 Politeness Principles - Geoffrey Leech**

Leech, like Lakoff, builds his pragmatic theory on Grice’s conversational principles. In his research, politeness is seen as a regulative factor in interaction and a key explanation of why people convey meaning indirectly. One of the strong points made by Leech in his politeness theory is the importance of the speaker’s communicative goal. He focuses on a “goal-oriented speech situation, in which *s* uses languages in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of *h*” (1983:15). He defines the politeness between interlocutors as “interpersonal rhetoric”. In interpersonal rhetoric, Leech proposes three sets of principles: Grice’s cooperative principle (CP), his own politeness principle (PP) and the irony principle (IP). Leech introduces his PP as designed to “minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs; maximize (all things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs” (1983). PP, like Grice’s CP, also consists of a set of maxims: 1) Tact, 2) Generosity, 3) Approbation, 4) Modesty, 5) Agreement, 6) Sympathy (see Leech, 1983).

According to Leech, the speaker should always act in the best interest of others and try to minimise the chance of not doing so. Leech sees his PP as explanations for the non-observance of the Gricean maxims (1983a:80). He claims that CP and PP interact with each other, because CP maxims are employed to explain how utterances are used to express a speaker’s indirect meaning, whereas PP maxims are used to understand why a speaker is being indirect. Leech’s view of the indirect achievement of politeness is helpful to the present thesis because Leech deduces the embedded meaning from a speaker’s intentions.

Although Leech provides an apparently fuller analysis of pragmatic phenomena, his theory is not beyond criticism. Fraser (1990: 227) argues that Leech's principle (1983) is too theoretical, since "there is no way of knowing which maxims are to be applied, what scales are available, how they are to be formulated, what their dimensions are ... and so forth." On the same lines, Mey (1993) also criticises the points which Leech makes to the effect that "some illocutions (e.g. orders) are inherently impolite and others (e.g. offers) are inherently polite" (Leech, 1983:83). Mey suggests that to determine an act as polite or impolite, one should consider the social hierarchy of speaker/hearer and the context. Fraser's and Mey's comments indicate the failure to consider cultural and situational context in Leech's theory. Another major problem with Leech's politeness maxims, as pointed out by many researchers, is that he leaves open the number of principles and maxims needed in order to account for politeness phenomenon (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lavandera, 1988; Fraser, 1990). Brown & Levinson state that if we need to create a new maxim every time we wish to explain every irregularity in language use, we will end up with "an infinite number of maxims" and a "vacuous" theory of politeness (1987:4). They therefore suggest that instead of treating politeness as rule-governed, we should try to form a model which illustrates the politeness choices made by speakers in interaction, both interpersonally and cross-culturally. Below, I discuss in some detail the points which Brown & Levinson make about politeness.

#### **2.4.1.3 Politeness Theory – Penelope Brown & Stephen Levinson**

The best-known politeness theory is proposed by Brown & Levinson. They were the first to systematise the politeness theory on the basis of their observation of the similarities in the linguistic strategies used by people from different language

backgrounds. Central to interpersonal politeness, Brown & Levinson's politeness theory is rooted in the notion of face. They claim that face is the motivation behind politeness. In particular, their politeness is influenced by Goffman's (1967) seminal study of 'face'. In order to better understand how the concept of 'face' is used as the basis in Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, it is necessary to give a brief sketch of the notion of face work introduced by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1967).

Goffman, who stresses the importance of understanding face as constituted in social interaction, defines face as an image "pieced together from the expressive implications of the full flow of events in an undertaking" (1967:31). According to this definition, it is not difficult to see that Goffman considers face as a discursive construct in interaction. Face, in this sense, does not reside in an individual, but is negotiated in the flow of communicative events. Goffman further notes that face is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for [her/himself] by the line others assume [s/he] has taken during a particular contact" (1967:5). On the basis of this latter quotation, Goffman seems to suggest that face is not a static image imposed upon individuals. Rather, it is formed during a 'particular contact'. Seen from this angle, face should be considered as the result of face-work during interactions. According to Goffman (1967: 12), 'face-work' refers to "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face". That is to say, face and face-work should be consonant with each other. Thus, building on Goffman's conceptualisation of face and face-work, Brown & Levinson developed their seminal work of politeness theory and expanded the notion of 'face' to positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Brown & Levinson claim that we all have two similar 'face' wants. They coin the names 'positive' and 'negative' for the two kinds of face. "Positive face", in their



definition, is the wish to “be desirable to at least some others”, whereas negative face is the wish to have one’s “actions ... unimpeded by others” (p.62). Based on the belief that people from every culture have similar face needs, Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory (1978) makes the strong claim that most relationships between people are stable and are maintained by universal rules in respect of maintaining each other’s face. Arndt & Janney (1985:293) support Brown & Levinson’s assertion and state that “the desire to maintain face and the fear of losing it are interpersonal universals transcending all sociocultural, ethnic, sexual, educational, economic, geographical and historical boundaries.” However, this universal claim later attracted the greatest criticism to Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory. The criticisms will be reviewed later in this section.

Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory is made based on the presupposition that “certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face” (Brown & Levinson, 1978:65). They suggest that threatening either the positive or negative face will influence the maintenance of relationships. Although we are all interested in maintaining other people’s face, Brown & Levinson note that we perform some acts which are intrinsically impolite and therefore threaten their face needs; for instance, orders, requests, suggestions, threats, warnings and so forth, which pose a threat to the addressees’ negative face, or disapproval, disagreement, criticism, etc. from us, which may jeopardise their positive face.

Brown & Levinson argue that, in normal circumstances, people will try to avoid face-threatening acts (FTAs). If an FTA is unavoidable, one will try to minimise the threat caused thereby. They further propose that the degree of threat can be evaluated according to three culturally sensitive social variables: social distance (D) between interlocutors, relative power (P) of the participants and absolute ranking (R) of the

impositions carried in the act in a particular culture. In addition to the three variables, the seriousness of an FTA is also determined by the participants in interactions. In any given situation, participants then select strategies (see Table 3) appropriate to its needs. The greater the threat of an act, the more a polite strategy is required. With this rationale, Brown & Levinson propose five strategic choices for speakers:

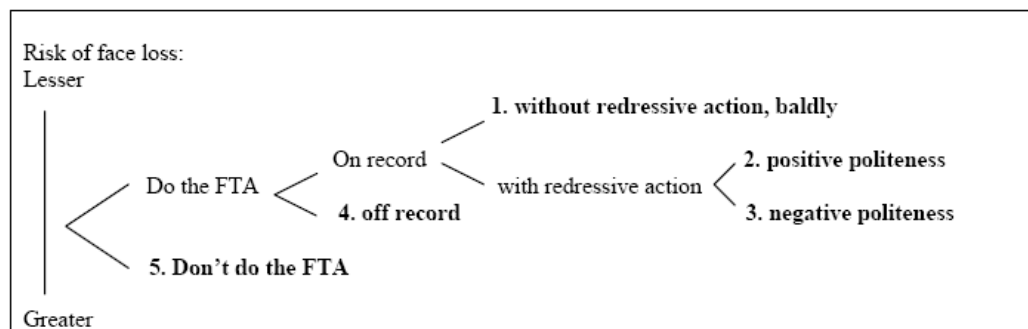


Figure 2.4: Circumstances determining choice of strategy (from Brown & Levinson, 1987:60)

The first strategy – bald, on record, as shown in Table 2, indicates when urgency is considered the priority and face need is not uppermost in the situation. For example, saying “Get out of there! The house is on fire!” makes it very unlikely that the request (get out of there!) will be interpreted as impolite, since the urgency of the situation (the house is on fire) takes precedence.

The second and third strategies, according to Brown & Levinson, are associated with positive and negative faces. In order to consider the other’s face and mitigate the possible face-threatening act, these positive and negative strategies involve redressive actions. Brown & Levinson suggest that people use these two politeness strategies to save their own or another’s face and to maintain a good relationship.

The fourth strategy (off record) is used when the speaker considers the stake of face loss too great and decides to address his point ambiguously, i.e. give hints. By doing so, the speaker then leaves it to the hearer to decide how to interpret the

message. There are fifteen off-record strategies: give hints, give association clues, presuppose, understate, overstate, use tautologies, use contradictions, be ironic, use metaphors, use rhetorical questions, be ambiguous, be vague, over-generalize, displace H, be incomplete, use ellipsis. These off-record strategies, though considered the most polite way of carrying out face-threatening acts, are in fact fairly problematic. Even Brown & Levinson admit that many of their off-record strategies are, in practice, on record when used (i.e. irony, rhetorical questions). The last strategy (don't do the FTA) is employed when the speaker considers the risk of face-threatening to be too great and decides to say or do nothing, in order to avoid face loss.

These strategies are shown in this example: you have just realised that you left your bag at home and do not have enough money to take a bus. You need to make a phone call to ask your mum to pick you up. You consider borrowing a mobile phone from your friend to make the call.

You will be applying:

i) "bald on record strategy" if you say, "I need to make a phone call. Give me your mobile." In this case, you make no effort to minimise the threat which the hearer may infer.

ii) "positive strategy" if you say "hey mate, do you have your mobile with you?" In this situation, the word 'mate' is used to signify intimacy with the hearer and the tone of the request is more intimate and casual.

iii) "negative politeness" if you say, "I feel really embarrassed to ask you this, but do you think I can borrow your mobile for a second? I need to ask my mum to come and pick me up. I left my bag at home and I don't have enough money to go back." In this situation, you show full awareness of the imposition it may cause to the hearer and then give a full explanation to show the urgency of making the call.

iv) “off record” if you say, “Oh my god. I left my bag at home. I need to ring my mum and ask her to come and pick me up. But my mobile is also at home. Where can I find a payphone?” In this case, the request has been made implicitly. It leaves the hearer to decide whether he wants to offer his mobile or not.

v) “don’t do the FTA” if you simply say nothing but look for a payphone.

Among the five strategies, positive and negative politeness strategies are most discussed for their close relationship with ‘face’. Brown & Levinson list fifteen positive and ten negative politeness strategies which are used to support or protect others’ faces.

***Positive politeness*** strategies are used to minimise the distance between speakers by expressing friendliness. The strategies are notice, exaggeration, intensified interest, in-group identity markers, seeking agreement, avoiding disagreement, presupposing common ground, jokes, concern for the hearer’s wants, promises, optimism, including the hearer in the activity, giving reasons, hedging, assuming reciprocity and giving sympathy. Some examples are listed below.

Attending to the hearer:

“You must be exhausted. Why don’t you get some rest?”

Avoiding disagreement:

A: “you must be angry about this.”

B: “Yes, um, not that angry but certainly not very happy about it.”

Joke:

“Let me tackle the steak first and then I can go on to deal with the ice cream.”

Hedging an opinion:

“It’s kind of hard for me to do.”

*Negative politeness* assumes that that your speech may be imposing on or intrusive to the hearer. Thus strategies are employed in order to preserve the other's face. Brown & Levinson claim that negative politeness is most similar to what people mean by being polite. Strategies of negative politeness include being indirect, questioning, being pessimistic, minimizing the imposition, showing deference, apologising, impersonalization, stating the face-threatening act as a general rule, nominalization and incurring a debt.

For example:

Being indirect:

"It's quite cold in here." (You are indirectly hoping that the hearer will close the window or turn on the heat for you)

Minimising the imposition:

"I was just wondering if I could borrow your notebook?"

Apologising:

"I am sorry but I don't think I can attend your wedding".

Showing deference:

"We all look forward very much to your visiting us".

Brown & Levinson's detailed account of politeness maxims is, however, not immune to criticism of some of its claims, as noted below.

#### **2.4.2 Criticisms of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory**

Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies are helpful in terms of their linguistic analytical approach to face work. Nevertheless, the politeness strategies are not

without criticisms. There are three main strands of criticism with regard to the politeness theory, dealing with: a) The universal claim of face; b) The conceptualization of politeness strategies; and c) Face-threatening acts. I give reasons based on these criticisms for adapting Brown & Levinson's politeness theory and show how the theory is modified for use in the present research.

a. The universal claim of face

Politeness theory is challenged for assuming the universal applicability of the politeness strategies across languages (Watts, Ide & Ehlich, 2005). For example, Werkhofer (1992; 2005) makes the following comment on Brown & Levinson's politeness theory:

...all versions of this view either neglect social realities completely or, adopting a remarkably simplistic, traditional approach, reduce them to only a small set of vaguely defined dimensions which are then relegated to a secondary status, thus again emphasizing individualism (p.157).

Mao (1994:460) suggests that Chinese concepts of face are oriented toward an ideal social identity, which gives rise to a public image. This definition of face is different from what Brown & Levinson claim about face, as something which does not impose on individual freedom of action. They consider an impediment to a hearer's freedom as a threat to the hearer's negative face. But it may not be considered a threat for a Chinese to insist on a friend's accepting a dinner invitation. Gu (1990) argues that that some of the face-threatening acts as defined by Brown & Levinson, are not necessarily face-threatening in Chinese society. They are ritualistic and it is also a sign of modesty first to reject an invitation. This makes it necessary and polite for the inviter to strongly urge a friend to accept it, in order to

show their sincerity.

Similarly, Ide (1988) argues that in Japanese society, some of the polite behaviours and utterances result from convention. As she says, “if the framework of linguistic politeness is to restrict the scope to a rational or logical use of the strategies, we will have to exclude not only the use of honorifics but also greetings, speech formulas used for rituals and many other formal speech elements which are used according to social conventions” (1988:242). Other researchers (Gu 1990; Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1988, 1989; Mao 1994, Nwoye 1992) also point out that Brown & Levinson’s politeness framework depends on Western culture. Similarly, Chang & Holt (1994:126) find that “Western understanding of facework is very much influenced by the idea of impression management, reflecting the dominant individualistic characteristics of Western cultures. This can be contrasted with the Chinese conception of mien-tze, which places more emphasis on the nature of the relationship.” Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) therefore suggests that politeness will be better understood if placed within the cultural and social context. Similarly, Spencer-Oatey (2008:20) argues that “politeness is managed through multiple aspects of language use” and can operate in different domains (i.e. domains of illocution, discourse or participation). The meaning of (im)politeness can change from situation to situation.

Thus, the criticisms of Brown & Levinson’s politeness framework are aimed at their conceptualisation derived from an individualistic culture, which disregards other cultural contexts. While this appears to be the main criticism of their work, we should be aware that an over-emphasis on cultural aspects may risk ‘stereotyping’, as discussed earlier (section 2.2). Thus, in order to avoid the cultural fallacy, we should investigate the context in interactions first, instead of basing our judgment on the

interlocutors' cultural backgrounds. In addition, even though researchers, such as those mentioned above, criticise Brown & Levinson's claim for the universality of face, they do not deny the universality of face wants. O'Driscoll (1996) states that even though the degree of face need may vary with background, face wants are universal. Ji (2000:1061) also suggests that "the two types of face [positive and negative] may play an unbalanced role in a particular culture, [but] there has been no evidence that they can not be identified in that culture." Agreeing with O'Driscoll and Ji, I argue that even though Brown & Levinson's claim of the universality of politeness strategies can be criticised, it is still generally believed that the negotiation of 'face' remains universal in the investigation of politeness. Thus, this thesis focuses on the investigation of face in the email interactions and their (im) politeness strategies are discussed from this standpoint.

#### b. The conceptualization of politeness strategies

There are three main parts of Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies which need to be reconsidered. The **first** is the way in which Brown & Levinson formulated their politeness strategies. It has been critically noted by some researchers that Brown & Levinson's work on politeness is based on the research on sentence level speech acts (see Coupland *et al.*, 1988; Holmes, 1988; Blum-Kulka, 1990; Wilson *et al.*, 1991/1992). Coupland *et al* (1988: 225) argue that politeness research should be made to "confront the sequential realisation of politeness phenomena in discourse." Other researchers such as Johnson (1992) and Calvo & Geluykens (1995) also indicate the lack of context in Brown & Levinson's research. Calvo & Geluykens state that "FTAs in conversation should be investigated in relation to the longer sequential organization in terms of turn-taking and not just in terms of sentence-level speech acts" (1995:5).



Acknowledging the weakness of their sentence level analysis, Brown & Levinson (1987) confirm the need for discursive analysis in politeness studies. They propose an alternative way of applying speech act analysis in the investigation of politeness, which chooses “more directly demonstrable categories as done in conversation analysis and then ... [gives] a derivative account of the intuitions underlying speech act theory” (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 10). Their statement points out the need for situational-based investigation. Yet this does not mean that speech act analysis is irrelevant in politeness research. On the contrary, by analysing sentences, speech act analysis provides basic understanding of people’s utterance. Brown & Levinson (1987) also state that, although they are aware that speech act categories are “underanalysed shorthand” in their framework, they believe it would still be difficult to avoid speech act analysis if they were to conduct their politeness research again. In my view, Brown & Levinson say this because of the inseparability of speech acts and politeness. Thus the integrated analysis of speech acts and politeness seems to provide this present research with some purchase in explaining the acts in intercultural communication via email.

It seems reasonable to build on this theory, which has been extensively researched. In view of this argument I propose to modify speech act theory and take the analysis to discourse level so that it can meet the need to understand such complex human communication as the construction of polite or impolite meanings. My modified theoretical framework will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

The **second** issue with Brown & Levinson’s politeness strategies is their presupposition that certain acts are inherently face-threatening and therefore entail conflicts. Schmidt (1980) describes Brown & Levinson’s view of politeness as a

“pessimistic, rather paranoid view of human social interaction” (p. 104). In the same vein, Kasper (1990:195) also states that Brown & Levinson regard communication as ‘fundamentally dangerous antagonistic behaviour’ and claim that politeness strategies are used as “strategic avoidance” (1990:194).

Brown & Levinson’s politeness model seems to predict that speakers will be more indirect in their utterances when the degree of face-threat is greater. Sifianou (1992) argues that Brown & Levinson’s assumption “reflects a preoccupation with impositions and a negative evaluation of politeness” (p. 156). Similarly, Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that, according to her cross-cultural empirical researches, there is no linear relationship between indirectness and politeness. She finds that the central part of politeness is not how indirect the message is, but its clarity.

**Third**, Brown & Levinson point out that positive and negative politeness are mutually exclusive. However, researches argue that some utterances can be oriented to both positive and negative face simultaneously. For example, Craig et al (1986) finds that speakers often use complex combinations of positive and negative politeness strategies when performing communicative acts. Wilson et al (1991/1992) also find in their written monologues of compliance-gaining experiments that some directives can threaten both positive and negative face at the same time.

In my view, the second and third criticisms are closely related to the notion of ‘face’, which is the basis of Brown & Levinson’s positive and negative strategies. Thus, it is more reasonable to discuss ‘face’ together with the strategies, instead of criticising the strategies separately. Brown & Levinson’s perception of face is discussed further below.

### c. Face-threatening acts

With regard to the concept of 'face' and Brown & Levinson's formulation of politeness strategies based on it, this section now looks at the reasons why systematised positive and negative strategies are inadequate to encompass all interactive phenomena.

As discussed above, Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies are based on the assumption that the speaker wishes to mitigate the potential face-threat carried in his/her utterance in order to maintain the hearer's want to be approved (positive politeness) or to be free of imposition (negative politeness). They suggest that speakers vary the selection of politeness strategies according to the degree of face-threat in the act. According to their theory, the seriousness of the face-threat can be measured by identifying the speaker's and hearer's power relationship (P), distance (D) and degree of act imposition (R). They assume a linear relationship between the seriousness of an act and the three variables (see section 2.4.1). However this assertion has been challenged by some researchers for being simplistic in addressing the dimensions in communication (Baxter, 1984; Gu, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Researchers have found that these three factors cannot be the only polite or impolite indicators. For example, Wilson *et al* (1998) investigate three kinds of FTA (giving advice, asking favours and enforcing unfulfilled obligations between friends) and conclude that the purpose of an act is also crucial in determining the degree of face-threat. Similarly, Holtgraves & Yang (1990) investigate the influence of power and relationship distance on politeness choices among American and Korean subjects and find that the least polite strategies were used by their subjects accompanying perceptions of the greatest distance. Their finding is contrary to what Brown &

Levinson propose in determining an FTA. Given the above, it is possible that the main issue in Brown & Levinson's politeness theory is their making the 'act' of interaction the focus of investigation, rather than 'face'. In this case, the same act could have very different (im)politeness results.

The above discussion calls for the need to consider the negotiation of 'face' as the focal element in the investigation of politeness and to take into account other contextual variables (i.e. topic, norms of interaction, computer-mediated features) in order to evaluate the (im)politeness of an act more accurately. Developing this line, the present study attempts to build on Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, taking into account the above comments by researchers. My modified politeness framework will be presented in the following section.

## **2.5 Modifying Brown & Levinson for this research**

The discussion above suggests that Brown & Levinson's politeness theory is most criticised for its claim that politeness indicators are universal and its determination of politeness from sentence-based investigation. Those comments point to the need to reconsider the role of 'contextual' elements and 'face' in politeness theory. On the one hand, the criticism regarding politeness theory's universality claim indicates a need to consider different cultural and situational elements. On the other, researchers who challenge the applicability of politeness theories based on sentence-based investigation concede the importance of contextual elements. For example, Watts (2005:20) argues that evaluations of impolite, polite and appropriate behaviour are problematic because "participants in social interaction are likely to differ in attributing these evaluations to individuals' contributions to the interaction." Mills (2005) argues similarly and suggests that the perceptions of (im)politeness

depend on the interlocutors who make judgments based on context and previous interactions. Adegbija (2000) supports this line of thinking and reports from his study that the interpretation of polite or impolite can only be made within a pragmatic context. Similarly, Spencer-Oatey (2008:20) states that “politeness is managed through multiple aspects of language use.” Held (1992) further states that “linguistic indicators are not in themselves polite, but ... the interplay of all the linguistic and situational factors generates a polite effect in the hearer which needs to be interpreted as such by him/her” (p. 135). Held’s argument reveals the role of gender in interaction, now an important area in politeness research.

It has been noted that gender may affect perceptions of politeness. For instance, what appears to be insulting in general contexts (swear-words) may become a coercive device for stressing group membership (see Hughes, 1992) and maintaining solidarity in all-male contexts (see Kuiper, 1991). Furthermore, some studies show that women, to strengthen relationships, tend to provide supportive feedback and avoid disagreement (see Gilligan, 1982, Holmes, 1995a, Mills, 2003). Holmes (1995a) concludes that “male interaction is typically more competitive, aggressive and argumentative than female.” Tannen (1990a:38) summarises previous research saying that women are more concerned with solidarity as are men with status. More recently, Mills urges for a contextualised analysis of gender in politeness and disputes the view that “politeness or gender consists of a range of stable predictable attributes” (Mills, 2003:1). To summarise, these researchers make these comments because they realise that the confined politeness theory cannot adequately explain the various kinds of human interaction. These comments all indicate that more contextualised investigation is needed in order to gain more comprehensive understanding of what (im)politeness is. How face is negotiated within the context should be the fundamental

question for interlocutors when they choose to use politeness strategies; this would explain why both interlocutors perceive the politeness strategies.

Although lacking more contextualised support in Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, there is no study which completely invalidates their conceptualisation of politeness. In defence of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, Watts (2003) asserts that their theory can "help us to refine and elaborate on their original insights" (p. 11). This is what this present study hopes to do. Thus, before applying Brown & Levinson's theory to the analysis of this study, it should include a few adjustments and assumptions.

Developing this line of thought, Watts proposes an intriguing viewpoint of politeness. He suggests that politeness can be defined in two parts: first order and second order politeness (Watts, 2003). Watts et al. define the first order as polite behaviour which is "perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups." Second order politeness, as a theoretical construct, is "a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage" (Watts et al., 2005: 3). In other words, first order politeness is concerned with common perceptions of 'polite' behaviour (i.e. "proper social conduct and tactful consideration of others" (Kasper 1994: 3206); second order politeness, which Watts dubs 'politic' behaviour, shows the theoretical construct of politeness in maintaining a balance between interlocutors (see Watts, 1989,1992).

This shows an attempt to distinguish situated politeness (saying thank you to your friend who lends you her car) from ritualised politeness (saying thank you to the person who opens a car door for you.) The distinction between 'polite' and 'politic' behaviour is that politic behaviour is "socio-culturally determined behaviour directed toward the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group" (Watts, 1992:50).

According to Watts, politic behaviour (socially appropriate behaviour) does not necessarily need to be polite, whereas nonpolitic behaviour would usually result in conflict. For example, it might be socially appropriate to say to your close friend: “Give me a lift mate.” Logically, from the linguistic politeness point of view, the request might not sound polite since the request is made without mitigations. However, in this example, a close relationship could influence the interlocutors’ perceptions of appropriacy in the request. Watts further points out that “from a socio-psychological point of view, politeness is not a static logical concept, but a dynamic interpersonal activity that can be observed, described, and explained in functional interactional terms” (2005:22).

It is interesting to note that, in the same way as Holliday conceptualises culture as large and small culture (see 2.2.1), Watt also suggests two spectrums for politeness. One is first order politeness which is governed by shared social values and cultural norms. The other is second order politeness, which is largely determined by the features of a given interaction. Both researchers indicate the need to unpack social behaviours and meanings from different angles. In the discussion of politeness, Watts’s view of politeness seems helpful, because it brings in different layers of conceptualisation of politeness in social conduct. It also highlights the importance of both empirical research and the theoretical idealisation of politeness. His broader definition of politeness has effectively adjusted to the need for cross-cultural politeness studies (i.e. the use of honorifics, ritualized expressions, address forms).

The notion of first and second order politeness is further developed in Locher & Watts’ ‘relational work’. Like Brown & Levinson, Locher & Watts (2005) derive key concepts from Goffman’s notion of face. However, Locher and Watts approach ‘face’ from a different angle. As discussed above, Brown & Levinson consider that negative

politeness and positive politeness are mutually exclusive. However, Locher and Watts claim that face is on loan to each individual for each interaction. They suggest that all of us have a “potentially infinite number of faces” (2005:12). They maintain that politeness “must be seen in relation to other types of interpersonal meaning” (2005:10) and go on to argue that “appropriateness is determined by the frame or the habitus of the participants within which face is attributed to each participant by the other in accordance with the line taken in the interaction (2005:17). They term the discursive process “relational work”. What is central in Locher and Watts’ relational work is the discursive perspective on politeness. Although what appears to be impolite may be appropriate, they note that what appears to be polite can be interpreted differently by different interlocutors. This means that the meaning of (im)politeness is determined by taking into account the other factors, such as relationship, social norms or other interactive factors. For example, it may not be considered as a threat to the subordinate’s face when his superior says “get me some coffee” because of their hierarchical relationship in the workplace. However, it might become a threat to the face if the request is made by the subordinate to his superior.

Locher and Watts also propose to see human interaction as a continuum which comprises all verbal behaviour from “direct, impolite, rude, or aggressive interaction through to polite interaction”. They claim that the continuum includes “both appropriate and inappropriate forms of social behaviour” (Locher & Watts, 2005:11). Locher & Watts (2005) rightly point out the multidimensional elements which constitute face in interactions. The negotiation of an individual’s face, in this regard, is not only for the sake of maintaining face in other people, but can also admit threatening face. In this regard, interactions can include impoliteness as well as politeness as a social strategy. This new trend of thought restates face as the central



motivation behind (im)politeness.

The notion of face, though referred to as the basis of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, is somewhat diluted in their main discussion of politeness strategies. Thus, if 'face' becomes the centre of discussion in the investigation of (im)politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson's conceptualisation of politeness as a series of face-saving strategies would inevitably expand to allow other possibilities, such as face-attacking (see Culpeper, 2005; Mills, 2003). Culpeper suggests that face-attacking acts can occur for the purposes of impoliteness. He maintains that "[i]mpoliteness comes about when (1): the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)" (Culpeper, 2005: 38). Culpeper's definition not only points out the possibility for impoliteness to occur during interaction, but also embraces both speaker and hearer's perceptions of impoliteness. This is to say that the meaning of (im)politeness is negotiated between the interactants in interactions. Similarly, Spencer-Oatey (2008:14) notes the multiplicity of face: "Face is closely related to a person's sense of identity or self-concept: self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with other (relational identity)."

The above researchers all seem to call for a more contextualised understanding of (im)politeness. The roots of politeness "go deep into the history and moral constitution of a society and as such require more than just attention to verbal and non-verbal manifestations. Its origins and workings are woven into the social fabric of interpersonal behaviour and only multidisciplinary research can hope to shed further light on them" (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003: 1467). In line with Bargiela-Chiappini, I use Brown & Levinson's politeness model as the basis for investigating how

interlocutors negotiate meaning and construct face in discourse alongside other researchers' empirical work on politeness, such as Spencer-Oatey's rapport management, Locher and Watt's relational work on politeness and Culpeper and Mill's work on impoliteness. It is believed that the integration of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory with the empirical work carried out by these researchers could unpack (im)politeness as a phenomenon which is embedded in social practice.

Acknowledging the importance of exploring (im)politeness meaning based on its context, it then becomes apparent for this research that the 'virtual context', where the email interaction takes place, needs to be discussed. Given the importance of the interplay between the meaning construction and computer-mediated discourse, there is not yet enough research on (im)politeness behaviours in the electronic world. Unlike face-to-face interaction, the meaning in email interactions is conveyed through written text. However, this does not necessarily mean that email communication lacks contextual cues, i.e. facial expressions and gestures (see Gumperz, 1990). In fact, its contextualisation cues are signified by words and symbols. In the hope of contributing to the understanding of polite or impolite language use in the context of new technologies, in Section 2.6, I discuss the interplay of (im)politeness and online communication.

## **2.6 (Im)politeness in online communication**

This section focuses on the (im)polite indicators in intercultural computer-mediated communication. Over the past few decades, the cultural variation between Eastern and Western cultures has been extensively explored. The identified cultural differences in these studies have become general indices for people who have face-to-face intercultural communication. However, Ma (1996) argues that

“intercultural communication via computer networks seems to have modified, if not drastically changed, some previously identified characteristics of FTF intercultural communication” (p.173). Ma’s argument points out the important role of computer-mediated communication and its possible influences on life today.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), as suggested by Sproull & Kiesler (1986), lacks the social context cues which FTF offers, such as the physical environment and nonverbal behaviours. Ma (1996) thus suggests that CMC “has changed the traditional view of communication environments” (p.175). Although its online nature makes nonverbal cues inaccessible in email communication, it has other ways of conveying this kind of communication. For example, some researchers (Rice & Love, 1987; Walther & Burgoon, 1992) find that writers can vary their choices of topics and punctuation marks and use words as relational cues to amplify meaning. Other researchers (Metz, 1994; Gumperz, 1990) point out the important role of “electronic paralanguage”, as emotive icons are known. Similar claims have been made by Walther (1992) that CMC users, in real-life settings, will eventually develop conventions and understandings which enable them to establish socio-emotional communication, for example through emotive icons.

According to Metz, there are four main uses for emotional icons (emoticons): 1) to verbalize physical cues (hahaha); 2) to describe actions (\*many hugs and kisses\*); 3) to emphasize (It’s NOT my fault!); 4) to signify facial expressions ( :- ) ). As these emerged from nine data, the emoticons became salient in every analysis (see Chapter 4,5,6). I am interested in exploring how emotions, are delivered in email interactions, as opposed to physical ‘face-to-face’ communication, and how face is negotiated via the used of emoticons in email.

Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (p.5). In other words, face is the presentation of the self to the others. Furthermore, Goffman suggests that we have an emotional attachment to the face which we maintain (1967:9). Email interactants, lacking physical presence, have created emoticons to facilitate their online interaction. Since face is central to the discussion of politeness, it is essential to understand how face is constructed and transmitted online.

The use of emoticons is frequently used to underline the written text. For example, “I am just kidding. Hehehe~”; “This is funny. Hahaha!”; “I am really upset about my test score ☹ “, “I am getting married. XD”, etc. Table 4 shows some emoticons which are frequently seen in online communication.

Emoticon	Meaning
^_^ ; :)	Smile
XD	Big smile
Orz	Depressed
@_@	Dizzy
>_<	Sad
^ ^ “	Ashamed
ˇ ˇ	Reluctant

Table 2.5 Emoticons

Hiltz (1986) notes that the lack of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication may cause difficulty in communication. Therefore, emoticons, in addition to the function of showing emotions, can also be used in nonverbal strategy to maintain interactional harmony by mitigating or strengthening words, e.g., “I had a big fight with my parents >\_<“. To maintain good communication, many people will modulate their verbal messages with nonverbal vocal and kinesic messages to avoid conflict and also to show their care of other people’s feelings, i.e. by offering criticism in a pleasant tone with a smiley face (Janney & Arndt, 2005). Lacking

physical contact between the interlocutors, online communication must rely mainly on words and signs to transmit meanings. The icons were created in order to make up for the absent physical appearances and gestures of the speakers (see Rice & Love, 1987; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). They rapidly became a new trend in the virtual world and are frequently seen in the virtual context nowadays. Intended to imitate real faces and gestures in FTF communication, I conclude that the emotive faces and gestures, like a pat on the back in FTF communication, can be used to intensify a compliment or to reduce the impact of bad news. I will argue that these 'virtual faces' in computer-mediated communication act to convey the values and attitudes of the speakers and consequently, they sometimes can help delivering the (im)polite intentions of the speakers. This aspect of computer-mediated communication is important to the understanding of online intercultural communication, since the online environment is the main context for intercultural communication. Thus, the meaning embodied in email should be understood in its own terms. That is to say, email's features and characteristics should be taken into account in intercultural communication.

## **2.7 Summary**

This chapter presented a literature review of the theoretical framework of this research, namely, intercultural communication, speech act theory and politeness theory.

In 2.2, the different views of culture were discussed in relation to this research. Following the discussion, the small culture where I place my research was discussed further in relation to the notion of intercultural communication. In 2.3, speech act theory was presented, showing how speech act theory is used to discuss politeness in

this thesis. In 2.4, an overview of politeness theory was offered. The pros and cons of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory were discussed in relation to the present research. In 2.5, I proposed to supplement the lack of contextualised explanations in Brown & Levinson's politeness theory with other empirical work on politeness, such as relational work, impoliteness, rapport management. In this research, the meaning of (im)politeness in email intercultural communication is taken to mean the negotiations between the participants in their email correspondence. Therefore, the investigation of meaning focuses not on the sentences but on the interactions. Thus, in order to convey the dynamics of email interactions and understand how meaning is developed and transmitted in emails, this research must consider the factors which contribute to and influence the participants' perception of (im)politeness in context. Finally, in 2.6, a contextualised politeness investigation was considered, along with computer-mediated features.

Overall, my argument has been that the exploration of 'face' as a negotiated image between interactants appears to be an appropriate point of departure for the analysis of politeness strategies. From there, the understanding of (im)politeness meaning is made with the considerations of relevant factors in the context. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodological approach which allows an understanding of the context and relational face work in email interactions.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes in its six sections, the methodological framework and research design for investigating online intercultural communication. In 3.2, bearing in mind the research aims and research questions, the research paradigm is introduced. In 3.3, alongside a summary of the pilot study, the research design of the email communication and the recruitment of the participants is shown. In 3.4, the methods of collecting and analyzing data are presented. In 3.5, some ethical issues are brought up for discussion. Finally, in 3.6, the focal points made in the chapter are summed up.

#### **3.2 Methodology and approach**

##### **3.2.1 Discussion of methodology**

The main purpose of this research into the meaning of (im)politeness in email intercultural communication between native speakers of English and Chinese is to investigate what characterises the elements of (im)politeness in email intercultural interactions. It intends to explore how the interactants negotiate their (im)politeness meaning in email in order to learn the possibilities of developing their intercultural understanding. Closely related to the aims of this research, the research questions are as follows:

1. What is the content and themes covered in the e-mail exchanges between speakers of Chinese and English in this intercultural email communication project?
2. What salient speech act(s) emerge in the communicative events and how are they used to negotiate the communicative goals?
3. How is the meaning of (im)politeness realised in intercultural email

communication?

4. To what extent can emails contribute to intercultural communication and understanding?

In seeking the answers to these questions, the discursive observations of the participants' email correspondence were a prerequisite. The investigations, based on the qualitative data, are considered to provide more in-depth insights into intercultural communication. The insights gained from the discursive investigation could provide more basic understanding of how people from different national backgrounds form and negotiate meanings. This view is based on considerations of both the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to intercultural studies in a computer-mediated setting.

The distinctions between these two research paradigms are closely related to their philosophical stances. Bryman (2004:19) pinpoints that the differences between qualitative and quantitative research are derived from "the connection between theory and research, epistemological considerations and ontological considerations". Quantitative research "embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective one" (ibid., 20). Through a more systematic and structured analysis of numerical data, 'hard' findings are generated to discover patterns and relationships between variables (Grix, 2001).

Qualitative research is often contrasted with quantitative research for its different underlying assumptions of what is reality and how the knowledge of reality can be acquired. Qualitative researchers approach social reality, as a "constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation" (Bryman, 2004:20). Qualitative research conceives that reality is better understood "from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated" (Cohen et al.,



2004:19). Radically differing from quantitative research, qualitative research is concerned more with the process of meaning making than with outcomes.

By and large, qualitative approaches develop theory inductively whereas quantitative research generates findings deductively through scientific investigations, typically taken in the form of numbers and statistics. On the one hand, qualitative research, though its findings cannot be generalized to other settings, can provide more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from an insider's viewpoint. On the other, quantitative research, even though its findings are usually considered to be objective and can be used to generalize a phenomenon, is criticized for its lack of power to explain people's behaviours. As shown here, both qualitative and quantitative researches have their strengths and weaknesses. They pertain to different aspects of reality, not its totality. One is no more or less useful than the other. Even so, I would maintain that the tradition of qualitative research is more suitable for the present study. The choice has much to do with my perception of 'reality' and my position on attaining knowledge of the world. These are, in philosophical terms, the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this research.

What one believes in underlies one's own philosophy as a researcher. To begin with, I should understand how my own belief shapes the design of this intercultural study. Opposing the notion of 'absolute truth' upheld by the rationalists, I believe that 'reality' is a process of conceptualisation of what one sees and observes of the world. People's experience is considered an important source of knowledge. This is more inclined to the constructivist position. Healy & Perry (2000:120) suggest that in constructivism, "reality actually consists of 'multiple realities'." One's assertion of what is 'truth' is subjective and valid in the particular context under inquiry. Reality, in this view, is continuously being reshaped and reconstructed. This ontological value

is in concord with the aims of this research. Instead of dichotomizing ‘cultures’ into ‘individualism vs. collectivism’ (Gudykunst, 1994) or ‘low-context vs. high-context’ (Hall, 1976), this research takes the hermeneutic approach to culture and defines the meaning of culture from the standpoint of the research participants. Guba & Lincoln also argue that since the constructions of realities are intangible, realities should be investigated in a “holistic and idiosyncratic fashion” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988:81). Their view agrees with Holliday’s suggestion that all the small acts of our everyday communication can lead to our understanding of culture (Holliday, 2004).

With this rationale, this research investigates what contributes to the meaning of (im)politeness and intercultural understanding between its participants. It focuses on the process of meaning negotiation rather than the results of intercultural contacts. The elements (i.e. technology, language use and writers’ backgrounds) involved in the interactions are considered essential to the process of meaning making. In my view, the construction of knowledge and the social context are inseparable. On this basis, the research takes an ethnographically-informed discourse study, as discussed below.

### **3.2.2 Ethnographically-informed discourse study**

Above, I link my philosophical position with the paradigm of constructivism. My ontological and epistemological values inform the decision to position my research in the qualitative research paradigm. In 3.2.2.1, I first discuss the traditional ethnography and the challenges of using traditional ethnographic methodology for email research. Then I show how ethnography-informed discourse study is proposed for this research in 3.2.2.2.

### **3.2.2.1 Traditional ethnography**

In contrast to the tradition in cultural essentialism, which highlights the ethnic differences between nationally-based cultures (e.g. Japan as exemplifying a high-context culture), ethnography conceptualises culture in a dynamic and constructive way. Thus ethnographic researchers aim to depict culture by immersing themselves in the participants' lives and understanding cultural systems from the participants' perspectives. Hammersley and Atkinson point out that ethnography research "involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995:1). Aiming to analyse the meanings in a culture by close observations of people's lives, ethnographic researchers believe that culture should be understood as real people in real situations.

They travel to a field site to live and interact with the local people, in order to 'learn' culture from the local people's perspective. Essentially, the ethnographic research draws upon the observations from the insiders' viewpoint to help to interpret phenomena. But they also want to understand the differences between an insider's perspective and that of an outsider. Spradley (1980:3) suggests that "ethnography is the work of describing a culture." He further highlights the principle of ethnographic research of learning another way of life from the native's perspective. Conventionally, ethnographers use participant observations, interviews and field notes to describe the social context, in order to see how other relevant factors in the context contribute to the meanings of acts. Inspired by how ethnography approaches social meaning, it is also my belief that that like, face-to-face interactions, the intercultural understanding

in computer-mediated communication would be better understood when the interpretation of meanings of acts could be made based on context where the acts were performed. This has pointed out the importance of contextualised understanding of meaning, which echoes the traditional ethnography.

However, the meaning of being ‘on-site’ to collect contextually driven data, as stressed by traditional ethnographers, is redefined in this research. Undeniably, there is no physical spot for researchers to travel to. Miller and Slater (2000) suggest that the “media can provide both the means of interaction and modes of representation that add up to ‘spaces’ or ‘places’ that participants can treat as if they were real” (p.4). This is to suggest that the interactions occurring in the seemingly boundless virtual environment should be regarded as real. Kern further proposes that technological developments can have far-reaching cultural implications for the lived experience of space and time (Kern, 1983). Similarly, Rheingold (1993) states that “CMC could provide for a far richer form of interaction than had previously been envisaged and ... a space for community formation” (cited in Hine, 2000). All in all, those researchers maintain that virtual interactions are just as real and authentic as face-to-face interactions in practice (see Baym, 1995a; Palme, 1995; Heeren, 1996; Hine, 2000).

The trend has led ethnography, originally mono-cultural and locally focused, to be conceptualized as “multi-sited” (Hines, 2007). Wittel (2000) asserts that “since both people and objects would be likely to become increasingly mobile, then ethnography has to get engaged with these movements”. Although traditional ethnography recognises the importance of observing and participating in people’s interactions in practice, it cannot be denied that interactions between people have extended to the virtual level, which is neither dominated by one community nor physically located in one place. This trend gives birth to the term ‘virtual

ethnography', a new development in the field of ethnography. In Hine's definition, "[v]irtual ethnography is not put forward as a new method to replace the old – rather it is presented as a way of bringing into focus both the assumptions on which ethnography is based and the features which are taken to be special about the technologies concerned" (Hine,2000:1). In other words, while rooted in ethnographic tradition, virtual ethnography is also closely related to engaging and participating in people's online interactions. Fernback suggests that virtual ethnographers should "develop a sense about the truthfulness and candour of their informants, just as ethnographers of the nonvirtual must" (Fernback, 1999: 216). In other words, doing ethnography in the virtual world also requires researchers to immerse themselves in the context under investigation and join in its activities in order to see them from the insider's viewpoint. Although fundamentally this research agrees with ethnography's constructivist view of culture, the essential research technique of participant observation in ethnographic research is not applicable to it.

What makes the research technique of being a participant observer unfeasible in this research are the research goals and online setting. To begin with, this research aims to investigate how people from different national backgrounds interact and develop intercultural understanding via email. In addition, the research seeks to explore how meaning is negotiated between the participants by observing their continued email correspondence for a period of time. Unlike traditional ethnography, where the collected data include the observations of other elements in interactions, such as nonverbal cues (e.g. speakers' facial expressions), the environment (e.g. inside a coffee shop in a hot summer afternoon), text-based emails are the primary source of data in this research. If I participated in the email interactions, I would need to correspond with others. My own exchanges with the participants might then bias

my interpretations, as I would inevitably have interfered with the process of meaning construction between the participants. My role in this intercultural project, then, was mainly to mediate and monitor the progress of the email interactions. In addition, pairs of participants first came into contact with one another through this research project. One aim of this research was to observe how the participants, as strangers to one another, begin to establish interpersonal relationships and intercultural understanding through their natural email interactions. If I participated in the email correspondence, my emails would constantly remind the participants of my presence. Thus, in order to observe the participants' email correspondence in a more natural unobtrusive way, I decided that I should not become personally involved in it.

The anonymity of computer-mediated communication is another online characteristic which could invite challenges to the authenticity of the ethnographic research. However, this line of criticism about online research is derived from the research experience of real-world discourse. Since computer-mediated communication is essentially structured in non-physical settings, the views gained from real-world research need not apply. Ma suggests that (1996:175) “[c]omputer networks have changed the traditional view of communication environments.” Unlike face-to-face communication, computer-mediated communication, which occurs in physical space, reshapes our understanding of ‘space’. This notion of electronic space calls for a new research paradigm, which could account for the interrelated elements of the new technology, the interactants who use the new technology and the communication made via the new technology. Mann & Stewart (2005: 183) propose to view “the ‘electronic word’ as a stand-alone conceptual category distinct from, but sharing qualities with, the spoken and the written word.” Similarly, Davis and Brewer state that “electronic discourse is writing that very often reads as if it were being

spoken – that is, as if the sender were writing talking” (1997:2). They argue that written text is “laden with conversation-like conventions” (ibid.: 156). I share the above views and consider that electronic discourse, which has gained increasing importance in the field of intercultural communication, requires an approach which allows this discourse to be understood on its own terms. Following this line of argument, it is proposed that a study of intercultural communication via email could be better informed with a more flexible but explanatory research approach.

Thus, I maintain that ethnographic approach should address the challenges brought by the nature of online communication. Eisenhart (2001b) also points out that ethnography should recognise the importance to consider the changing human experiences, such as the use of new technologies in establishing relationships. Acknowledging the need to adjust ethnographic methodology for online research, this thesis modified the use of ethnographic approach taken into account the nature of email discourse. Below, I explain how ethnographically-informed discourse study is formed for this research.

### **3.2.2.2. Ethnographically-informed discourse study**

Above I have discussed ethnographic research and the way in which it has helped shape this study. Due to the challenges of traditional ethnography for online research, this thesis proposes to modify the ethnographic methodology and integrate with other research disciplines. This methodology is named “ethnographically-informed discourse study”.

It is ethnographically informed in that I aim to explore meaning from the emic (insider) perspective. Thus, observing of the interaction is still essential. For this reason, Hymes’ ethnography of communication is used as the basic framework of the

discursive investigation. Hymes' ethnography of communication is particularly helpful in understanding communication, because its purpose is to unpack and understand the complex elements involved in interactions. The ethnographic approach brings together the emic and etic analyses of communication and investigates "patterns and functions of communication, nature and definition of a speech community" (Saville-Troike, 1989: 11). Thus the purposes and the functions, intended and unintended, perceived and unperceived, of communicative events for their participants are judged by the states of mind in which the participants engage (see 3.5.1 for more discussion about Hymes' ethnography of communication).

In order to enhance the description of ethnographic context, speech act theory is used as a basic unit of investigation into written data. On the basis of speech act analysis, it explores the politeness or impoliteness meanings embedded in speech acts. This approach to meaning echoes the developing trend of combining ethnography with linguistic analysis. This theoretical and methodological movement is termed linguistic ethnography (see Creese, 2008; Hammersely, 2007; Eisenhart, 2001; Rampton 2007). Linguistic ethnography argues that a collaboration of ethnography and linguistics could bring more systematic and discursive understanding to the context of social world. Creese (2008) notes that "interdisciplinary nature of linguistic ethnography that allows us to look closely and look locally, while tying observations to broader relations of power and ideology." To be more specific, linguistic ethnography argues that researchers should consider more than the phenomenon of the social world. The linguistic analysis of the interactions could also provide different insights into the interpretations of a social practice. Rampton et al (2004:4) argue for 'tying ethnography down and opening linguistics up.'

Similarly, Creese (2008) also notes that "there has been an emphasis on the



advantages of combining analytical approaches, rather than relying on only one approach or framework.” (p.) All in all, the researchers seem to point out the need for enhancing ethnography by conjoining an analytical framework so as to provide conscientious and careful analysis. In line with Creese and Rampton’s view, it is also my view that ethnographic research will be better equipped when the interpretations can be illustrated through not only researcher’s observation but also through the investigation of the actual speech produced by the participants. Eisenhart (2001) also states that “we need to adjust our conceptual orientations and methodological priorities to take into account changing human experiences such as migration, diaspora and the use of new technologies” (cited in Creese, 2008). This statement rightly points out the need for theoretical and methodological advances in ethnography. In line with Eisenhart, I also believe that as the online activities spread, it is inevitable that the study of social practice will expand to the virtual level. Acknowledging this trend, this research has adopted ethnography along with discourse analysis of speech acts and politeness.

In order to widen our understanding of the way in which speech acts and (im)politeness strategies are selected under certain situations, we need contextualised information. Thus, in addition to email entries, qualitative data, such as questionnaires, interviewing, a discourse completion test and e-journal, were collected (The research methods for collecting the data will be discussed in detail in 3.4). The different qualitative data collected in this research were used to amplify my understanding of the virtual context surrounding the investigated emails. The triangulation of the data interpretation is termed in this study “ethnographically-informed discourse study”. Discourse analysis, in this thesis, is considered as a way of approaching research problems with more comprehensive and

critical views. The discourse analysis approach will be discussed in more detail in 3.5.

Discourse analysis is normally used to discover the hidden meaning behind two different types of discourse: extended texts and dialogues, both spoken and written. “The techniques of discourse analysis provide a tool for exploring the ways in which accounts are constructed to make them convincing and a resource for the ethnographer to help maintain a skeptical, stranger perspective towards the observed features of text” (Hine, 2000:143). Echoing Hine, I consider that ethnographically-informed discourse study would create a balance between contextualised interpretations descriptions of acts, and more systematic and discursive investigations of language use in the context. More discussion about the analytical framework of this research will be presented in 3.4.

So far I have presented the values and criticisms of the use of ethnographic approaches to computer-mediated intercultural studies. The discussion justifies the decision that ethnographically informed discourse study would be the methodological framework of the present study. In the next section, I present the research design and describe the participants in the research project.

### **3.3 Research design**

This research envisages that the investigation of what assists or hampers the development of the intercultural understanding in the virtual world could contribute to the knowledge of intercultural communication competence in computer-mediated settings. Theoretically inspired by the ethnography of communication, this present study maintains its role in the interpretive research paradigm which is informed by discourse analysis. As discussed in the previous section, an ethnographically-informed discourse approach is chosen for this research in the light of the research goals and the

medium of communication investigated. In 3.3.1, I first introduce the way in which the research design is focused upon the Internet and discuss its advantages and disadvantages. Next, I describe the research design. I summarise the pilot study to indicate how the research procedures were validated or modified where necessary. In 3.3.2, the recruitment of the participants is described.

### **3.3.1 Research design based on the Internet**

With the technological advance of electronic mail, online instant messengers, the Bulletin Board System (BBS) and web conferences, people from all over the world have been enabled by virtual activities to express ideas and make contact with one another at any time. A cartoon in *The New Yorker* showed a dog sitting in front of a computer and proclaiming “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner, 1993). This cartoon, though meant to be a joke, symbolises the obscurity of the Internet, a characteristic which stops the Internet user’s identity and background from being immediately apparent. This characteristic is particularly apposite to this research, because it investigated the email communication between people from different national backgrounds. Without visual references, the way in which people construct and form understanding in online interactions should be considered on its own terms. Ma states that “[i]ntercultural communication via computer networks, however, seems to have modified, if not drastically changed, some previously identified characteristics of FTF intercultural communication” (Ma, 1996:174). People’s intercultural contacts in the virtual world seem to have changed the significance of space, time and physical contact. Keeping close to the research aims for understanding how meaning is negotiated via email, this research, in investigating

email exchanges between Chinese and English speakers, seeks to explore how new technology has shaped or informed our understanding of intercultural communication.

Internet World Stats reports that the average number of Internet users was 1596 million in March, 2009 (for details, visit Internet World Stats). The growing impact of Internet activities on our world is evident. The virtual world, though an abstract notion, influences people's lives profoundly. People chat, do business or contact others via the Internet. Its use has merged with our everyday activities. As the Internet has become ubiquitous and gained in influence, this research is likely to indicate that online activities should not be seen as merely an extension of life elsewhere, but as a different discourse of communication which could work collaboratively with or independently of our lives elsewhere. Following this line of argument, I realised that Internet activities should be studied on their own terms. Thus, it seemed appropriate to collect all the data needed to use the Internet. Essentially, the activities performed on the Internet are what construct the virtual reality of the focal participants of this research project. On this basis, the study was substantially structured in a way which would result in electronic qualitative data, such as a web-based informed-consent form, web-based Discourse-Completion Test, web-based pre-survey questionnaire, email, e-journal and e-interview.

As discussed in Chapter 1, because this research seeks to explore the possibilities of developing intercultural awareness via email in Taiwan's foreign language education (English in particular), I divided the participants into two groups, the Taiwanese participants and the English-speaking participants. In response to the research goals, some portions of the research design had to be pre-specified, such as recruiting participants who were English and Chinese speakers, setting up e-pals for them, keeping records of email entries from each pair on a weekly basis and collecting

reflective e-journals from the participants. The nature of setting up a propitious environment for the participants seems to resemble an experimental design, but this proposed study did not intend to test theories or hypotheses. In fact, the pre-specified conditions were set to suit the research goal. In attempting to understand how Chinese and English speakers interact with one another and how relationships are established via email, it was necessary for me to keep track of the participants' email exchanges from the beginning. However, as noted above, it is difficult to gain access to people's private emails. For this reason, most studies on intercultural communication via email are done within schools, as part of the classroom curriculum. In this case, the researcher (usually the teacher of the class) can collect students' emails (cf. Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Nutta & Spector-Cohen, 2002). But for me it was impossible to ask for the participants' email entries. Thus, this study created a project named the 'Email intercultural communication project', in order to recruit people who were interested in cultural and language exchanges. It was formed for the purpose of gaining authorised access to the participants' emails. The actual goal of this study was not to measure whether the participants' communicative competence had improved after email interaction with native speakers. Rather, through the investigation of speech acts and (im)politeness strategies in emails, the research wanted to learn how Chinese and English speakers negotiated meaning and developed their intercultural understanding with a view to finding how individuals represent their own cultural backgrounds and interact with others. The research methods of collecting these data are discussed in 3.4. The next section illustrates the research procedure.

### **3.3.1.1 Research procedure**

As Glesne & Peshkin (1991:30) advise, “the researcher should pilot their observations and interviews in situations and with people as close to the realities of the actual study as possible.” In line with their view, the procedure for collecting different qualitative data and performing analysis was followed from 5/12/05~2/01/06. All the steps taken in the pilot study were recorded and reflected upon. The thoughts and issues emerging from the pilot study were recorded in the field notes for future reference. In addition to identifying the problems thrown up by the pilot study, actually conducting the pilot study let me familiarise myself with the research design. In what follows, I summarise the pilot study and show how its results prompted the modifications made to the main research design.

Since the pilot study was designed to test the feasibility of the research design, the procedure of the former was meant to be identical to that of the main research. The qualitative data under scrutiny included pre-survey questionnaires, e-mail entries and reflective journals. Before the project began, a web-based pre-survey questionnaire was sent to the participants in order to collect background information on them. During the time for the email intercultural project, the participants were asked to exchange three emails with their e-pals every week. At the end of the week, the participants would write down their feelings about their email exchanges or other things in their e-journals and send them to me.

The purpose of the pilot study was to test the applicability of each step in the research design. The thoughts and issues occurring in the pilot study were put down in my research diaries for reference during the main research project. For example, three of the participants from the pilot study wrote in their journals that they felt that it was difficult for them to write three emails per week, since the email correspondence

between them and their e-pals from another country would take more time due to time differences. Thus, in the main research design, the participants were asked to exchange at least one to two emails per week. Another problem concerned the e-journal. Participants either frequently forgot to send me their e-journal or did not know what to write in it. Thus, to ensure the problem did not occur in the main research, an e-journal reminder containing a suggested question was sent to all the participants every Friday.

Following the data collection, the main analytical frameworks – the speech act and politeness theory – were used to analyse the data in the pilot study. The analysis proceeded from investigating the analysis of the speech acts of sentences. Then the sentence was further investigated on the basis of Brown & Levinson's politeness theory. The speech act and politeness analysis, though providing insightful views about the use of language to convey meaning and force, could not alone provide sufficient logical explanation for the interplay between intercultural understanding, speech acts and politeness strategies. This was because the analysis was still confined to sentence-level and took no account of the wider context. Acknowledging the importance of having a more contextualised view in the analysis, I then used Hymes' 'communicative event' (1974) in the main research analysis as the focal unit of the analysis. Within the communicative event, the speech acts and politeness strategies were then discussed in relation to the writer's goal and other relevant issues. In order to provide more information about the context of the communicative event under discussion, Discourse-Completion Tests (DCTs) and e-interviews were administered in the main research project. They are methods which are commonly used in cross-cultural studies. These research methods are helpful because DCT provide a context for the participants and allow the participants to reveal their reactions toward

the situation. It is assumed that the participants' reactions to the situation reflect more realities than merely depending on the analysis of sentences. As a follow-up research method, e-interview gives the researcher opportunities to discover and understand the reasons behind the participants' reactions. These research methods are discussed in more detail in 3.4.

Informed by the pilot study, the main research project, by and large, consisted of three phases. In phase one, the participants' personal background information was gathered. They also had a web-based informed-consent form, pre-survey questionnaire and a Discourse-Completion Test (it was called the situated scenario in the research project). In phase two, the participants began the email correspondence with their e-pals. The data collected in phase two included email entries and weekly e-journals. In phase three, after the email intercultural project was finished, I conducted e-interviews with the participants. The research procedure is as shown in the table. Each data collection method is discussed in 3.4.

<b><u>Research Procedures</u></b>	
Phase one: 31/07/2006- 06/08/2006	1. Informed- consent form ↓ 2. Pre-survey questionnaire ↓ 3. Discourse Completion Test
↓	
Phase two: 07/08/2006- 29/10/ 2006	4. E-mail correspondence and weekly e-journal
↓	
Phase three: 12/5/2006- 23/06/2007	5. E-interview

Table 3.1: Research Procedure



They can be found in appendices 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Given the volume of the data, I can only show a complete set of data for each item. In the next section, the recruitment of the participants is described.

### **3.3.2 Recruitment**

For the purpose of collecting naturally occurring data between the Chinese and English speakers who were interested in language or cultural exchanges, the participants of this research were volunteers. The recruiting methods included posting messages on universities' web pages, posting project information on the language exchange forum and by word of mouth. Eighteen participants were recruited in total. They came from England, the USA and Taiwan. A detailed introduction to the research design was sent to the people who showed interest in the project. Their decision to take part could be finalised only when they had read through and signed the web-based informed-consent form, which contained a detailed introduction to the research design (see Appendix 1 & 2). Before going into the recruitment details, I should clarify that this study does not suggest that English speakers all act alike, nor that Chinese speakers do. It set out, however, to explore the dynamics of email interactions between people from different national backgrounds.

Although this research was not intended for training purposes, it was hoped that the findings of this study could contribute to the development of intercultural awareness in foreign language education. For this purpose, the research tried to recruit people who shared similar interests or wanted to have intercultural exchanges. I began my recruitment with students who were studying at a teachers' college, since they were closely related to the field of language education. The juxtaposition of their two different roles as current students and future teachers would not only allow me to

explore how students might interact via email, but also give me a chance to see whether such interactions would stimulate thoughts between trainee teachers. I therefore initially settled on “trainee teachers” as those I wished to recruit.

Based on these reasons, I recruited Taiwanese volunteers via the Bulletin Board System (BBS) of the National Taiwan Normal University. There were five female and four male participants in the Taiwanese group. Unfortunately, I could only recruit the trainee teachers from the Taiwanese group. Since I had difficulties finding English trainee teachers to join this project, I inevitably had to modify my target participants and recruit English speakers who were interested in learning Chinese/Mandarin. I used various techniques to make more people aware of the project. These techniques included setting up a blog (a personal website which individuals create for themselves to express opinions, share ideas with others or display photos) to discuss my project, creating and signing up for web groups which people with the same interests could join, distributing recruitment notices to TESOL and other language listservs and posting project flyers on the notice boards of schools and language centres.

The recruitment began in May, 2006. A detailed introduction to the research was sent to the people who showed interest in the project. The introduction included the procedure for the project, the benefits for them of joining the project and the work which the project would entail (see Appendix 1 & 2). Those who confirmed their willingness to join the project would receive a web-based consent form (see Appendix 3). Once this was completed, the website would then automatically connect the participants to the pre-survey questionnaire, where the participants could give some details of their background. The implementation of the web-based forms is discussed in detail in 3.4.

Due to the complexity of my respondents’ backgrounds, it is difficult to

categorise the participants of this study on the basis of their national backgrounds. The participants are speakers of English and Chinese. The English speakers are from both America and Britain. Some of the English speakers from the UK are British-born Chinese. Although they were born, raised and educated in UK, their inheritance as Chinese background may or may not influence their perceptions of 'culture'. For example, one of the British-born Chinese participants wrote in one of her emails that she was considered a Chinese in the UK, but British in Hong Kong.

In addition, the English speakers of this study are from the US and the UK. It has been noted that US English and UK English speakers differ not only in some lexical usages, but also in their language usage. For instance, Creese (1991) finds in her study that the American and English participants appeared to have different perceptions in regard to the choice of making certain speech acts, such as compliments or requests. This is to say that even though English is spoken in both America and Britain, variations, such as language usage and social values, still exist. For the above reasons, it would be problematic to use 'culture' as the basis to categorise the participants. Thus the groups in this study are labelled as 'English speakers' and 'Chinese speakers' merely to signify their respective native languages. Accordingly, they are not categorised as two 'cultural' groups but are loosely defined as two language-speaking groups.

Since the participants did not know each other before joining this project, it was necessary for me to be a mediator and pair up the participants for email correspondence. Without any presuppositions of what would emerge as the salient factors in the intercultural communication, I had only my first observations of participants' profiles to go on when I split them into pairs. They knew that the information which they provided would become one of the sources used in pairing

them with an e-pal. The participants' interests and gender were the two pieces of background information which stood out in the questionnaires. However, personal interests could not be used as a primary source for pairing them up because this would not satisfy the condition of diverse interests. Thus, I paired them on the basis of gender and personal interests, if applicable. The dividing of gender groups was not chosen to presuppose the role of gender in intercultural communication. Rather, this decision was made because of the binary nature of gender, which made it easier to form pairs without sacrificing other factors, such as age, educational background or interests. Hence, though not specifically looking at the gender factor, I divided the nine Chinese and nine English speakers into three main categories: 3 males/males, 3 males/females and 3 females/females. The participants' profiles, which summarise the information from the participants' pre-survey questionnaires, are presented in the table below (see Appendix 4 for the content of the pre-survey questionnaire). In order to protect the participants' anonymity, the names appeared in this thesis are pseudonyms. I gave the participants new names with the same initial as their real names.

The emails collected from the participants began on 07, August, 2006. A greetings email was sent to each e-pal pair at the beginning of the project (see Appendix 5). Participants were reminded again in this email about the routine of writing one to two emails and one e-journal entry per week. There were no restrictions on the content of the email correspondence. However, in order to avoid awkwardness at the beginning of the e-mail correspondence, a situated scenario (DCT) was included in the email as a prompt for the participants to start their interactions. Participants did not need to use the prompt to start the email interactions if they preferred to initiate their own topics. During the 12-week email intercultural project, a total number of

330 email entries were collected from the nine pairs of participants.

During these three months, some technical problems, such as missing emails and indecipherable codes arose. Most of the problems were quickly solved either by the participants themselves or me and did not, therefore, seriously disrupt the process of email correspondence. Although there were times when the participants did not write for a week or so because they had gone on holiday or for other personal reasons, the participants usually resumed writing to their e-pals when they could.

One exceptional issue which the research project encountered was that one pair of the participants had some serious argument on the topic of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> (the event is discussed in detail in the data analysis of the first pair). Eventually the participants wanted to discontinue their email interactions with one another. Since their decision to cease email correspondence was made in the 9<sup>th</sup> week and a total number of 24 emails was collected from this pair, both participants agreed that the collected data could continue to be used in this research. The summary of the participants' profiles is shown below.

Background Pair	Chinese speakers (Taiwan)	English speakers (UK/US)	Total numbers of Emails
Pair 1 Male/ Male	<b>Ed</b> is a 25-year-old master student in Chinese. He has been learning English for 2 years. He has many friends from other countries. He has been teaching Chinese to foreigners for three years.	<b>Keith</b> is a 62-year-old real estate manager in the US. He has been learning Chinese for 3 years by self-study. He described himself as “diplomatic but direct”.	24
Pair 2 Female / Male	<b>Chloe</b> is a 25-year-old student in Taiwan. In addition to English, she speaks a little Spanish. She considers herself to be an extrovert, who is looking for easygoing/outgoing friends to share life experiences.	<b>Matthew</b> is 23-year-old ,American-Vietnamese who is working as a realtor in the US. He has been learning Chinese for 1 year. He likes to talk about business, politics and philosophy with friends.	34
Pair 3 Female / Male	<b>Sherry</b> is a 22-year-old student in Taiwan. She has been learning English for 10 years and she has just come back from New Zealand on an exchange student programme. She feels that she has different thoughts about cross-cultures after the student exchange experience. Thus, she is interested in learning about her e-pal’s cultural values and views about cross-cultural friendship.	<b>Andy</b> is a 45-year-old British operations manager who is currently living in Indonesia. He has been learning Chinese for 3.5 years. In addition, he speaks Indonesian and a little Korean. He lived in Fujian, China for a while. He loves the diversity of Chinese culture and the warmth and honesty of the people.	42
Pair 4 Female/ Female	<b>May</b> is a 20-year-old student in Taiwan. She has been learning English for 8 years. She feels that even though she has learned it for such a long time, she does not have many chances to use the language.	<b>Eve</b> is a 20-year-old student in Britain. She has been learning Chinese for 3 years. Because of her parents’ original national backgrounds, she can also speak Cantonese and Hakka. She enjoys learning another language and she is open-minded about new knowledge.	40
Pair 5 Female/ Female	<b>Jane</b> is a 21-year-old student in Taiwan. She has been learning English for 9 years. She considers herself a person whose personality is a bit aggressive but active and easygoing. She likes challenges and loves meeting people from other countries.	<b>Helen</b> is a 19-year-old student in Britain. She speaks English and Cantonese. She is eager to learn new things and meet different people. She describes herself as a friendly and down to earth person who can get along with most people.	16
Pair 6 Female/ Female	<b>Joy</b> is a 22-year-old student in Taiwan. She has been learning English for 10 years. In addition to English, she also speaks French. She joined this project because she wishes to learn more about Western culture.	<b>Doris</b> is a 27-year-old student and academic advisor in the US. She has multiple nationalities(English, German, Dutch) and she is interested in finding other peoples’ opinions or stereotypes about the US. She is also interested in learning about other countries’ social norms and taboos. She has a busy life as she is a single mother of a five-year-old girl and she works and studies at the same time.	28
Pair 7 Female / Male	<b>Penny</b> is a 25-year-old English teacher in Taiwan. She has been learning English for 12 years. She considers herself to be a shy but easygoing person. She also thinks that she is very good at comforting people and giving emotional support. If she had time, she would like to travel more often.	<b>Peter</b> is a 34-year-old man who works in information technology (IT) in Britain. He likes travelling and hearing people conversing in foreign languages. He describes himself as a shy person who likes to stay at home and work with his computer.	105

Pair8 Male/ Male	<b>Nelson</b> is a 24-year-old Taiwanese who graduated from the English department. In addition to English, he also speaks Japanese. He enjoys travelling and taking photos.	<b>Calvin</b> is a 19-year-old student in Britain. He has been learning Chinese for 2 years. He likes Chinese food and the Chinese way of life. His girlfriend is from China and he wishes to learn more about Chinese language and culture.	24
Pair 9 Male/ Male	<b>Roger</b> is a 24-year-old manufacturer in Taiwan. He has been learning English for 10 years and is currently learning Japanese. He has never had an e-pal before and would like to take the chance to practise his English with his e-pal via email.	<b>Bill</b> is a 34-year-old retail worker in Britain. He has learned some Japanese and has just started learning Chinese. He has had e-pals from Japan. He likes talking to people from other countries and learning about their country and also their views on Bill's own country (Britain).	17

Table 3.2: Participants' Profiles

In the following section, I discuss in detail the methods employed in this research.

### **3.4 Data collection**

This section presents the methods for research into virtual communication and its cultures. Patton (2001: 3) notes that qualitative researchers take the naturalistic approach to understand the “real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest”, but lets the “phenomenon of interest unfold naturally.” This highlights the fact that qualitative analysis usually reflects the researcher’s understanding of a phenomenon from her/his investigation of the qualitative data.

Even though researchers in the positivist tradition challenge the validity of the qualitative approach, Taft (1988: 61) considers validity as a “quality of the conclusions and the processes through which these were reached” and says that it is maintained by indicating “the particular criterion of truth that is adopted”. In this research, the trustworthiness of the interpretation of any issue was approached from different perspectives using different sources of qualitative data. This approach is termed “triangulation”. Creswell & Miller (2000:126) define triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study.” Patton (2001:247) further notes that “triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods”. Mathison (1988:13) advises that “it is necessary to use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study” in order to “control bias and establishing valid propositions.” Thus, triangulation is critical when using naturalistic and qualitative approaches. For this research, different sources of data were



employed for the purpose of triangulation. The sources were the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), pre-survey questionnaire, email entries, e-journals and e-interviews. They will be discussed in turn below to show their validity and reliability.

### **3.4.1 Discourse Completion Test (DCT)**

The Discourse Completion Test (hereafter referred to as the DCT) is a research method which has been commonly used in cross-cultural studies. Before I introduce it, I should specify that although it was used to collect data this study, eventually the DCT data were not used in the data analysis. This was because the data collected from the DCTs was confined to certain scenarios, which could not be used to support the interpretations of such complex interactions as those in the actual emails between the participants. I will briefly introduce this research method and discuss its inadequacy in answering the needs of this study.

A DCT is a kind of test in which the participants are required to respond in a given context. It is considered relatively convenient to retrieve the participants' responses to a fixed topic. This approach is distinct for its empirical emphasis on data collected through a research design from which the outcomes are drawn. DCTs are widely used for the empirical investigation of speech acts in cross-cultural communication. For instance, Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1984) used the DCT to compare the realisation patterns of two forms of speech act, requests and apologies, among various nations. Iwai & Rinnert (2001) conducted a DCT study regarding the making of requests and apologies in different countries. Olshtain (1989) also used DCT to investigate the use of four different languages (English, French, German and Hebrew) in apologies. An example of a DCT in which the learner is asked to complete

a speech is given below:

You are at a meeting and you say something that one of the participants interprets as a personal insult to him.

Investigator: I feel your last remark was directed at me and I take offence.

Informant: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Olshtain, 1989)

The general purpose of this kind of research is to gain more cross-cultural understanding in order to create more effective interpersonal relations when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds (Carbaugh, 1990; Paige, 1992). It is generally regarded as an effective way of collecting speech data. This research method was originally applied in the present research because it was hoped that looking into the participants' responses would let me compare their responses in the scenario with their actual email correspondence. Thus the data collected from DCTs could give me a preliminary idea of the similarities and differences of the two groups' responses to the same scenario and, at the same time, the results of the DCTs could be used in juxtaposition with the participants' email entries. I then adapted the scenario from DCT as an icebreaker at the beginning of the email correspondence (see Appendix 5). The icebreaker is considered necessary because, based on the experience from the pilot study, most participants did not know how to start their first emails. The exchanges of ideas on the "situations" stated in the DCT could, it was thought, be an effective way to encourage interactions. Thus, the scenarios written in the DCTs were used as lead-in topics to begin the email exchanges. By using DCTs to open the discussion between the interactants, I hoped that the responses elicited from DCTs and the natural data of the opinion exchanges of the DCTs between the interactants could both be analysed and compared.

However, the problem with the DCT approach is that the result may or may not reflect what the speakers would actually say in real life. Cohen and Olshtain (1994:13)

claim that the DCT “is a projective measure of speaking and so the cognitive processes involved in producing utterances in response to this elicitation device may not truly reflect those used when having to speak relatively naturally.” Similarly, Beebe & Cummings (1985), who compared the responses collected from DCTs and the naturally occurring data from telephone conversations, find that “written role plays bias the responses toward less negotiation, less hedging, less repetition, less elaboration, less variety and ultimately less talk” (Beebe & Cummins, 1985:3; cited in Wolfson et al., 1989:183). This research experienced a similar process. Because the data elicited from the DCT were not generated in interactions, they did not seem to reflect how the participants would react in real interactions. Therefore, the data from the DCTs could not adequately support the basic theoretical assumption of this study, which is that knowledge is co-constructed with meaningful interactions.

Moreover, since the scenarios in the DCTs aimed only to investigate the participants’ responses to a certain speech act (a scenario for making apologies, a scenario for paying a compliment), the data were too narrow to support real interactive situations, where various speech acts generated naturalistically could be used in one communicative event for different communicative goals. Thus, the DCT data could not serve the purpose for triangulating with other data in this study and eventually they were not used in the data analysis.

### **3.4.2 Web-page-based survey**

In order to collect some background information about the participants, they were sent a pre-survey questionnaire at the beginning of this research project (see Appendix 4). The questionnaire was intended to find out more about the participants’ backgrounds, such as their language learning experience, impression of the target

culture, topics of interest to them, reasons for participating, etc. It was essential in this study to have rich background information about the target participants, since such information could be used as a source of evidence to support or contrast with other data, such as the email entries and the reflective journals. In order to make the survey more convenient and easy of access to the participants, a web-page-based consent form and survey were created.

Mann & Stewart (2005) point out that the benefits of using web-page-based surveys are that they survey can be given “an attractive appearance utilizing text formatting, colours and graphics” and would appear “identical to all respondents”. Moreover, “[i]t is also easy for respondents to complete” (Mann & Stewart 2005: 70). The easy access for participants has helped in generating high rates of response (Kehoe & Pitkow, 1995). Nielsen also states that “The highest response rates come when surveys are quick and painless.” Apart from the response rate, the responses can be collected quickly (Smith, 1997; McCullough, 1998). Unlike the traditional method of postal surveys, which obliges the participants to post back their forms after completing them, web-page-based surveys these days attract much attention from researchers (see Comley, 1996; Coomber, 1997; O’Connor & Madge, 2000). Mann & Stewart suggest that “[i]t may not be long before the creation of Web survey pages is routinely taught in social science research methods courses” (Mann & Stewart, 2005: 71).

However, a web-page-based survey is not without drawbacks. Since it is created online, it can attract people who may not be represented in the sample and therefore affects the validity of the survey (Pitkow & Recker, 1994). In addition, since browsers of the Internet are not all the same, a web-page-based survey can incur technical problems when it is being accessed with a different browsing system (Kehoe &

Pitkow, 1996). Taking into consideration both the advantages of using a web-page-based survey and its problems, the online survey of this research was created to be easy for the participants to operate. The participants would receive an email which gave the procedure for filling out the online survey. The email contained a link to the online survey and an attachment (the exact questionnaire in Word format) in case the web page was difficult to access. To finish the survey, participants needed only to use the web link provided in the email to answer the questions and then submit the form. As a precaution against the possible interference of irrelevant responses from non-participants, the participants were given a password to the online survey to ensure that they alone could access the web page. The carefully designed web-page-based survey of this study turned out to be effective. All eighteen participants' surveys were successfully collected through the web page within two weeks.

### **3.4.3 Email entry**

Email, short for Electronic mail, is a form of computer-based interpersonal communication between people who are designated as recipients. It is an asynchronous communication which allows the writer to compose and edit message before sending the message to the recipients. The recipients of the email can range between one and as many as the sender wishes. In response to the email, the recipients of the email can also choose to reply to one or all the people on the recipient's list.

The function of email has been debated over the years. Daft & Lengel (1984) define email as a lean medium which can be used only to transmit information. More recently, other researchers have argued that email is, in fact, value-laden and carries contextualization cues (Huang, Watson & Wei, 1998; Williams, 1999; Zmud &

Carlson, 1999; Abdullah, 2003). In this view, the function of email is determined by the interactants of the email correspondence. Abdullah considers email “a rich repository of relational communication” which allows writers the flexibility to personalize their messages (Abdullah, 2003, p. ii.). This suggests that email, though presented mainly in a text-based form, can be used for various social functions, such as sending holiday wishes, setting up a business meeting, or making new friends. The understanding of each email is negotiated between the email sender and the recipient. This interactive characteristic of email makes it somehow similar to face-to-face communication, yet it retains its asynchronous nature and allows writers to compose, edit and send it at their convenience (see Walther, 1996).

Taking this line of argument, rather than seeing email only as a tool for delivering information, email can be seen as an online context of communication. Boshier (1990) describes email as “a context which is ‘characterised by equality of opportunity and reciprocity in roles assumed by participants’” (Boshier, 1990: 51). This argument points out that people can form and negotiate ways of communicating in the email context. Furthermore, Boshier (1990:51) also suggests that email provides an “ideal speech situation”, where conversation is “free of internal or external coercion”. Agreeing with Boshier’s view, this study, essentially rooted in the qualitative research paradigm, attempts to explore how (im)politeness meaning was negotiated discursively by the participants during their email interactions.

#### **3.4.4 E-journal**

The use of diaries in social science research has increased (see Harvey, 1990; Alaszewski, 2006). Journals are used as a way to “increase the understanding of participants who shaped history and culture and were shaped by it” (Chamberlain &

Thompson, 1998, cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000). Creswell (1998) considers this method to be one way to describe people's lives using their own words. There are primarily two forms of journal – solicited and unsolicited. The format of the solicited journal is similar to that of the interview; it lets researchers pose questions or set guidelines for composing journals, whereas the unsolicited journal is spontaneously written (Elliott, 1997; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Alaszewski, 2006). This section focuses only on the discussion of solicited journals, because they were used in the research project.

Having access to the participants' journals can improve understanding of an issue from the participants' perspective. As stated above, the solicited journal method is closely associated with the interview method, in which the researcher tries to elicit responses which relate to the research interest. Mann & Stewart (2000: 93) point out that the solicited journal method has its advantages, making it easy for both the participant and the researcher to send and collect the journals (i.e. by email). The researcher can gain insights into the participants' thoughts or lives. But its disadvantage is that, since it requires participants to send their journals to the researcher at regular intervals, it may seem a burden.

Taking the pros and cons into considerations, I employed the online journal method with some modifications. In consideration of the participants' busy lives, the journals were collected only once a week. Following the pilot study, I moved the collecting time at the weekend, for two reasons: 1) the participants, after a week of email correspondence with their e-pals, might have some feelings which they would like to share via the e-journal and 2) after reading the participants' emails for a week, I as the researcher might find some issues on which it could be interesting to hear the participants' thoughts. For these two reasons, an email reminder about the weekly

e-journal was sent to all participants every Friday. In it, I suggested one e-journal topic each week. For example: Have you encountered any difficulties so far? How long does it take for you to compose one e-mail? (see appendix 9 for the suggested topics for e-journal) To prevent the participants from feeling obliged to answer something that they were not interested in or did not wish to talk about, they could choose the content of the e-journal; either what they chose or in response to my question. Throughout the project, only a couple of e-journals were not directed at the suggested questions.

The purpose of the e-journals is to provide the researcher with another source of data on the participants in order to support or contrast with the interpretations of the email entries. The average length of the e-journals was about 5 to 10 lines. Mostly, the participants chose to answer the questions asked in the weekly e-journal reminder. Sometimes the participants would use the e-journals to state the difficulties they had encountered with their e-pals. The e-journals provided the participants with a space to talk freely about their e-pals and their thoughts and feelings during the project, since the participants knew that I was the only one who would read their words (see Appendix 6 for examples)

### **3.4.5 E-interviewing**

Interviewing is an important research method, which is often used in qualitative research as a way of exploring the meaning of the examined topic in more detail. Kvale (1996) describes the main goal for qualitative research interviews as to “understand the meaning of what the interviewees say”. Lofland (1971) defines this research method as ‘guided conversations’. There are three main types of interview: structured, unstructured and semi-structured. Structured interviews, such as are used



in surveys, are questions which are pre-set by the researchers and the respondents are given little or no chance to mention other points, except for the answers requested. Unstructured interviews, on the contrary, proceed with little or no constraint from the interview questions. The interviews usually begin with broad and general questions and allow the interviewee to guide the conversation. Finally, the semi-structured interviews “consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allow the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Gill et al, 2008: 291). Mann & Stewart (2000: 75) suggest that “[t]he choice of interview method usually depends upon the research question itself, or upon the qualitative approach which informs the overall research design.” In the present research, semi-structured interviews were employed for the purpose of clarifying issues arising in the participants’ email correspondence. Because of the difficulty of conducting face-to-face interviews with participants in different countries (Taiwan, England and America), semi-structured interviews were administered via email. I discuss the pros and cons of e-interviews below.

The E-interview, short for electronic interview, is a research method, replacing conventional face-to-face interviewing by the use of the Internet. Bampton & Cowton suggest that, in comparison with the face-to-face interview, the e-interview entails two fundamental changes to interviewing: “In relation to time, the interactions between interviewer and interviewee are likely to be asynchronous, with pauses of varying lengths between bursts of communication or ‘episodes’; while in terms of space, the relationship takes place ‘at a distance’ through the medium of electronic, screen-based text” (Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

These differences have their advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of using email to conduct semi-structured interviews are three-fold. First, email

interviewing is convenient to both interviewers and interviewees. Foster (1994) notes that e-interviews overcome the barrier of different geographical locations and time do not need to travel around to do interviews. Moreover, since the interviewers and interviewees do not need to meet for interviews, the interviewees can respond to the interview questions when they have time and the interviewers can carry out interviews with a number of interviewees at the same time. Second, on the one hand, e-interviews conducted in semi-structured format enable the researchers to “track the issues which are of most interest to themselves” and “seek further clarification and elaboration of answers” (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 75). On the other, due to having less time pressure in answering the interview questions, interviewees can freely organise their thoughts and hence may provide more elaborated or in-depth feedback. Third, the interview data collected from emails could be more reliable because the words used in the data analysis are the words written by the interviewees. There is no need to transcribe the interviewees’ responses since they are already written in their emails and therefore, there need be less concern for the accuracy of the interview transcriptions.

Notwithstanding the advantages for conducting interviews online, the nature of computer-mediated communication still has its drawbacks. First, as discussed above, the advantage of the time leniency for the interviewees could become a nightmare for the interviewers. Unlike face-to-face interviews, e-interviews allow the interviewees to choose the time and place where they answer, or, worse, choose not to answer at all. Mann & Stewart point out that “it could be wrong to assume that all participants will be prepared to talk in depth ...” (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 151). Even the participants who do respond to the e-interviews may “go to the questions they have the most to say about and skip the others” (Smith-Stoner, 1999, cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000:

149). Second, due to the absence of face-to-face contact, the information which is conveyed in non-verbal cues (i.e. facial expression, tone, gestures) is missing. As Bryman (2001: 321) remarks, “Qualitative researchers are frequently interested not just in what people say but also in the way that they say it.” Even though the emoticons (i.e. ☺ ) have been created in computer-mediated communication to supplement the missing non-verbal or extralinguistic cues (see Metz, 1994), it has been acknowledged that “online discourse might lack some of the analytic breadth that is possible when FTF conversation are observed” (Mann & Stewart, 2000:87).

The above advantages and disadvantages of e-interview were, of course, considered when conducting the e-interviews of this research project. In order to gain more understanding of a particular issue from the participants’ point of view, the e-interviews were conducted towards the end of the research project. The interview questions were mainly formed on the basis of the research questions of this study and readings of the participants’ email correspondence. Since different issues emerged between each pair, different interview questions were prepared for every individual in the different pairs. Mostly, the questions for the participants in the same pair would focus on the issues related to the communicative event selected for further analysis. It was hoped that, by contrasting the participants’ feedback on the event with my interpretation, the accuracy of the analysis could increase. Since the interview questions were formed individually, it took time to go through all the emails and e-journals before I could put together the interview questions. Thus, the e-interviews did not take place immediately after the project finished. In order to refresh the participants’ memories, the questions were asked along with some background information. For example, I would first describe the topic which the participants were writing about in the email in question and might quote the participant’s own sentences

from his/her email. Then I would ask the question relating to this context. Around ten to twelve questions were presented in each e-interview. Follow-up e-interviews were requested when the participants' answers were not clear or new information emerged in the first e-interview and further clarification was needed (see Appendix 7).

After sending the e-interviews, it took almost five months before I finished collecting the participants' responses, due to the participants' busy work and study schedules. Eventually, fifteen out of the eighteen participants had completed the e-interviews. The numbers of e-interviews conducted with each person are indicated in the table below.

Pair	Name	E-interview
1.	Keith	2
	Ed	2
2.	Matthew	0
	Chloe	1
3.	Andy	1
	Sherry	1
4.	Eve	1
	May	1
5.	Helen	1
	Jane	1
6.	Doris	0
	Joy	1
7.	Peter	0
	Penny	3
8.	Calvin	1
	Nelson	1
9.	Bill	1
	Roger	1

Table 3.3: The numbers of e-interviews with each participant

As seen in the table, there were three participants who did not respond to the e-interviews. I made a few attempts by sending them emails or sending messages on MSN, but these were ignored. Since, as indicated in the informed-consent form, the participants reserve the right to withdraw from the project, they could choose to

cooperate or not with the researcher; hence, after waiting for a few months, I did not continue to ask the three participants to have e-interviews. Although this inevitably influenced the richness of the data for analysis from the pairs thus affected, the problem was not serious, since other rich qualitative data had already been collected for the data analysis.

In this section, I have presented the methods used for collecting the qualitative data. In the next section, I will show how different qualitative data were used to triangulate the information from the data analysis.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

In this section, I describe how the various qualitative data collected in the research project were used to support the data analysis. First I should introduce the analytical framework of this study and then the procedure of analyzing the data.

#### **3.5.1 Analytical framework**

Inspired by the ethnographic approach, this study considered all the relevant factors (i.e. the topics of the emails, the relationship of the interactants, the norm of communication) when interpreting the email messages. I argue that the embedded factors could all be influential to the meaning of a message and in turn, shape the interactants' understanding of the email content. This view is in line with Goodwin and Duranti's (1992:32) notion of context: "The notion of context stands at the cutting edge of much contemporary research into the relationship between language, culture and social organization, as well as into the study of how language is structured in the way that it is." Yet while acknowledging the importance of context in social research, little agreement has been reached on what counts as 'context'. Goodwin & Duranti

(1992: 2) point out that the definition of context varies and “it does not seem possible at the present time to give a single, precise, technical definition of *context* and eventually we might have to accept that such a definition may not be possible.” Despite different definitions of the term, Goodwin & Duranti argue that it is generally agreed to be “[a] relationship between two orders of phenomena that mutually inform each other to comprise a larger whole” (ibid.:4). This view points out the interdependence of factors which contribute to a complete understanding of a context. But, in order avoid seeing context as a static “theatre-stage backdrop” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992) or “conceptual garbage can” (Clark & Carlson, 1981) where researchers ascribe the reasons of some phenomena which could not be sufficiently explained within the researchers’ analytical frameworks, we should seek for a clear definition of what people mean by ‘context’. Firth (1957) was the first to acknowledge the pitfalls in the notion of context; he introduces three of its components: the relevant features of the participants, the relevant objects in the situation and the effect of the verbal action. Developing from Firth’s categories, Dell Hymes (1974, 1986) reworked the components and developed the *ethnography of speaking*, which focuses on the analysis of the communicative event. Saville-Troike (2003:23) defines a communicative event as “a unified set of components throughout, beginning with the same general purpose of communication, the same general topic and involving the same participants, generally using the same language variety, maintaining the same tone or key and the same rules of interaction in the same setting”. This definition is particular helpful for the present research because it sees each communicative event as unique interpersonal contact which is created and shared by the interactants. Moreover, using ‘communicative event’ as the unit of the analysis is useful for exploring and explaining what topics are discussed in email interactions

and how the interactants form understandings during the email correspondence.

In order to understand how the communicative event is structured, Hymes identifies its elements and proposes the SPEAKING model, which is the acronym for scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. The eight components are what contribute to a communicative event as a whole. Hymes views it as critical to investigate “communicative activities as a whole, so that any use of channel and code takes its place as part of the resources upon which the members draw” (Hymes, 1974). He suggests that in order to speak a language accurately, one must not only know the grammatical rules, but also the rules about the contexts in which language should be used. Jones comments that Hymes’ framework for investigating context is “not limited to the physical reality surrounding the text. Instead the focus is on the ‘models’” that people build up in their minds (and in their interaction) of the situation ... and the kinds of behaviors that will show them to be ‘competent’ members of particular communities” (Jones, 2004). In short, Hymes’s SPEAKING model draws on different aspects of a speech situation in order to enrich the understanding of the context. Hymes (1974) maintains:

Studies of social contexts and functions of communication, if divorced from the means that serve them, are as little to the purpose as are studies of communicative means, if divorced from the contexts and functions they serve. Methodologically, of course, it is not a matter of limiting a structural perspective inspired by linguistics to a particular component of communication, but of extending it to the whole (p.5)

Even though Hymes’ model was created for the purpose of investigating face-to-face spoken discourse, I argue that his SPEAKING mnemonic can assist the investigation of computer-mediated communication. Herring (2001) also notes that “[a]nalysts of computer-mediated discourse have many of the same needs for classification as traditional spoken and written discourse analysts.” For example, she finds that in computer-mediated discourse, people exhibit different online

characteristics during the exchanges of different topics. In online exchanges, tones and intonations are signified by the use of emoticons (i.e. ☺) or conventional linguistic practices (e.g. hugs and kisses). The cues displayed in the interactions are termed contextualization cues by John Gumperz (Gumperz, 1982). The term is used to “refer to speakers’ and listeners’ use of verbal and nonverbal signs to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended” (Gumperz, 1992:230). He further notes that ‘contextualization-based’ investigation of communication would allow us to go beyond the sentence-level of understanding.

In line with this view, I follow Hymes’ ‘ethnography of speaking’ approach and apply the primary analysis to the communicative event of each pair. Within the communicative event, the main analytical frameworks, speech act and (im)politeness investigations are discussed, together with considerations of other factors relevant to the event (see Chapter 2 for speech act and politeness theories). Though not restricted to the investigation with the SPEAKING model, it is believed that context-based investigations of (im)politeness meanings in the communicative events allow meaning to be understood from different perspectives, such as the participants’ backgrounds, topics, or norms of interaction. In this sense, the participants’ speech acts are linguistic tools to convey meaning. It is one of the interactional elements which contribute to a communicative event. Following Hymes’ conceptualisation of communication, the structure of the data analysis in this research will be presented in the next section.



### 3.5.2 Data analysis- ethnographically informed discourse analysis

To make the theoretical discussion of the analytical more concrete, this section deals with the structure of the ethnographically informed discourse analysis. Building the analytical frameworks on speech act and politeness theories, the study aims to examine the interplay between linguistic performance and its pragmatic function in its context. In order to fulfil the research need to investigate acts in their context, my interpretation of the participants' act is based on their email discourse. It is believed that discourse-informed investigation, derived from Hymes' ethnographic approach to communication, is helpful in terms of giving more in-depth and contextualized views of the participants' language use. Below, I first introduce how 'discourse' is defined in this research. Following that, the structure of the data analysis is presented.

Fairclough (1992:28) defines discourse as "more than *just* language use: it is language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice." Similarly, Sherzer (1987: 296) suggests that discourse is "an elusive area, an imprecise and constantly emerging and emergent interface between language and culture, created by actual instances of language in use and best defined specifically in terms of such instances." Under these definitions, discourse appears to encompass both a macro level of knowledge (i.e. social norms) and a micro level of interpersonal meaning which is formed in interactions. In this view, language use is one of the elements which interconnects and is interrelated with other contextual elements; this then constitutes social practice. Thus, the analysis of discourse requires the embedded values and meaning in interactions to be unpacked. Gumperz (1991) suggests that discourse analysis involves the understanding of the presuppositions underlying people's communication. According to Gumperz, cultural norms or ideological values

would manifest themselves in interactions. For this reason, it is essential for discourse analysis to take into account the embedded communicative elements which affect the interpretation of meaning of the context.

In similar view, van Dijk (1997) defines discourse analysis as text in context which concerns with the dimension of action. This definition makes the focus of the analysis in discourse analysis the act of communication. van Dijk (2000) states that “[d]iscourse analytical approaches systematically describe the various structures and strategies of text or talk and relate these to the social, political or political context. For instance, they may focus on overall topics, or more local meanings (such as coherence or implications) in a semantic analysis. But also the syntactic form of sentences, or the overall organization of a news report may be examined in detail” (2000:35). Developing from van Dijk’s definition, I would further propose that discourse is meaning in interaction. That is to say, discourse, which is constituted in interaction, comprises not only the semantic and syntactic meaning of the sentence, but also the pragmatic meaning of the sentence. Applying linguistic discourse analysis to computer-mediated communication, this research focuses on the analysis in email discourse.

Susan Herring, who was one of the first researchers to apply discourse analysis in an online setting, gives a useful description of online discourse analysis: “In the broadest sense, any analysis of online behavior that is grounded in empirical, textual observations is computer-mediated discourse analysis” (Herring, 2004:339). In the present research, the computer-mediated discourse analysis, which focuses on text-based qualitative data collected via email, requires different levels of discourse analysis in the email context. Stubbs (1983:1) defines discourse analysis as ways “to study the organisation of language above the sentence or above the clause and

therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. It follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language use in social contexts and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers.” Similarly, Brown & Yule (1983:1) suggest that “[t]he analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purpose of functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs.”

Hymes also states that “it is not linguistics, but ethnography – not language, but communication – which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be described” (Hymes, 1969:3). Similarly, Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz (2007:20) point out that the complexities of communication could be better presented through “ethnographically informed in-depth analysis of what transpires in an encounter.” It is not difficult to see that Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz have centred their investigation on what happens around an encounter. In line with this view, the analysis in my research focuses on any communicative event which has emerged as salient in the participants’ interaction (see Hymes, 1974). Within the identified communicative event, a linguistic analysis was carried out through the lens of Austin and Searle’s speech act theory (Searle, 1969). Finally, Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory was used to discuss the sentence’s pragmatic functions in its context. One of the aims of this thesis is to discover whether the sentence’s semantic meaning is in harmony with its pragmatic meaning. The two levels of investigation of language use in emails could provide a more thorough understanding of the way in which intercultural (mis)understanding is negotiated and developed. The theories used in the analysis were the main source for conceptualising the framework of the data analysis. However, since this research did not set out to test

theories, they were not strictly applied. Other empirical studies were also used to support the analysis. The data analysis is shown in the flowchart below. They are discussed in turn according to the chart.

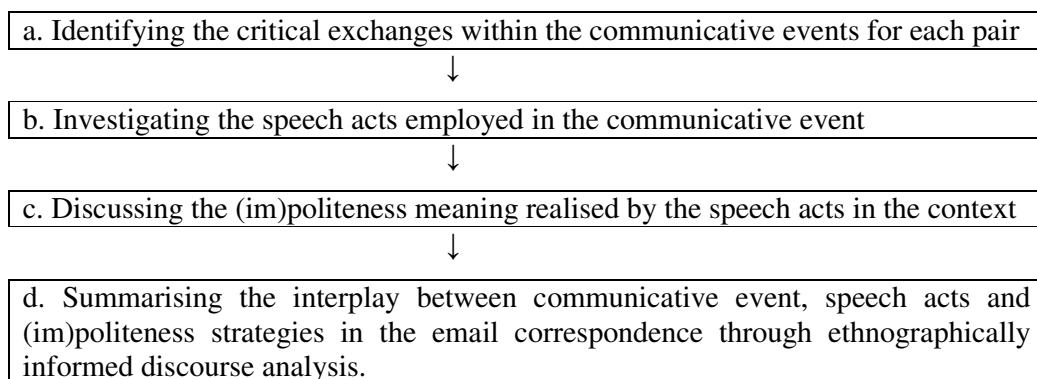


Table 3.4: Analytical framework

a. Identifying critical exchanges within the communicative events for each pair

The communicative event is used as the unit of analysis in this research because it offers a bounded entity. It is a means of reaching an in-depth understanding of the interrelationships between the components of communication (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 1989; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Communicative events are “restricted to activities or aspects of activities” and “are directly governed by rules of norms for the use of speech” (Hymes, 1974:52). This means that exchanges in different communicative events bear different communicative goals and are bounded and realised by their speech rules. There could be several communicative events within a communicative situation for different communicative purposes. For example, during a discussion of ‘someone getting fired’, here might include the events of ‘seeking support’, ‘showing empathy’ or ‘asking for financial help’. Certain expectations of the interactive routines or speech performance are embedded in the interactants’ exchanges in the events. Thus, changing the interactive rules could bring effects to the

relationship and the understandings of the interactants.

For this research project, during the 12 weeks, 332 email entries and 175 e-journals were collected. Many topics emerged from the email correspondence; and within each topic, some communicative events took place in the participants' exchanges. Since it is impossible to discuss every communicative event in detail, I focused on the events which appeared to be critical to the development of the participants' intercultural understanding and interpersonal relationships, in the light of observations from the participants' email entries, e-journals and e-interviews. Since communicative events, according to Hymes (1974), are normative and routine, this analysis seeks to provide examples of both normative and non-normative sociolinguistic behaviour in the participants' paired email exchanges. The critical episodes selected for analysis in this thesis are therefore examples of both routines and non-routine communicative events as the pairs correspond over email. The theoretical concept of communicative event is used to foreground particular critical exchanges interpreted as such by me as relevant to the participants and where possible confirmed as such by the participants themselves in their e-journals and e-interviews. These critical events therefore highlight both examples of routine patterns as well as examples of routines broken and noticed by participants and the researcher. Saville-Troike suggests that "brief interactions between people almost always consist of routines" (Saville-Troike, 2003: 109). Thus breaking the routines could mean that other more important communicative agendas have been given precedence in the interactions. Furthermore, these events were considered critical exchanges because the events had made impacts on the interactants' relationships.

The participants in this research project displayed a preference for topics which were of immediate interest to either themselves or their e-pals. For instance, topics

such as the current political situation, relationships, and various personal matters prevailed across all the data sets. Within these topics, the exchanges which appear to be important in terms of establishing interpersonal and intercultural relationships were then identified for further discussion. The critical exchanges within the communicative events of each pair are given a title in order to facilitate indexical referencing for each pair.

	<b>Pair 1</b>	<b>Pair 2</b>	<b>Pair3</b>	<b>Pair4</b>	<b>Pair5</b>	<b>Pair6</b>	<b>Pair7</b>	<b>Pair8</b>	<b>Pair9</b>
<b>Event</b>	9/11 Event	Proposing	Interview advice	Dieting	Relationship issues	Offensive questions	Near accident	Avoiding political topics	Apologising for the long email

Table 3.5: The critical exchanges within the communicative event of each pair

**b. Investigating the speech acts employed in the communicative event.**

Speech acts, the smallest unit in a communicative event, were discussed in terms of their syntactic structure and semantic meaning. Bateson (1972) suggests that every communication carries two messages. One is the basic message, which we can clearly understand from its literal meaning. The other one is a metamessage, which indicates how the speaker wants others to understand his/her literal message. Accepting Bateson's premise, I was seeking to understand the speech acts, not just as they appeared in the written words, but also in line with the speaker's meaning. In order to do so, information such as participants' backgrounds, interviews and e-journals were also considered in the speech act analysis of the email content.

**c. Discussing the (im)politeness meaning realised by the speech acts in the context.**

The investigation of speech acts in emails would then lead the analysis to a discussion of their pragmatic functions. Different (im)politeness strategies could be used to achieve a communicative goal. Without considering the relevant factors in the

communicative event, it would be presumptuous to interpret writers' intentions. Watts (2003) emphasises the importance of contextualized interpretations. He suggests that the evaluation of polite or impolite "is not merely a matter of the linguistic expressions that ... [a person] uses, but rather depends on the interpretation of that behaviour in the overall social interaction" (Watts, 2003:8). Holmes (1995:21) also points out that politeness is 'content dependent'. This means that in order to more accurately interpret the data, one needs to pay attention to the elements which constitute (im)politeness in the interaction.

d. Summarising the interplay between communicative event, speech acts and (im)politeness strategies in the email correspondence through ethnographically informed discourse analysis.

Finally, these two levels of analysis were summarised with reference to the relevant factors which contribute to the analysis of the communicative event. The discussion comprises elements of topic, gender, interpersonal relationship, politeness, email features and other relevant factors in the email context. It is believed that all the elements in the context contribute to the (mis)understanding of what counts as (im)politeness during interactions. By going beyond the words in emails and discussing the interplay between the factors which could influence meaning construction, one is more likely to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the way in which people from different backgrounds negotiate mutual understanding in the email context.

Although it was important for this research to obtain rich and informative data from the participants, the participants' rights should not be neglected. In the next section, some ethical issues of online research are discussed.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

Punch points out that ethical issues are the focal concern of the social research because “the research involves collecting data from people and about people” (Punch, 1998:281). Punch’s assertion is also valid for online social research because people’s behaviours and talk in computer-mediated discourse are still the main interest of the investigation. Yet the different nature of the real world and the virtual world could bring up different ethical issues. Johnson (2001: 68) points out that “computer technology creates new tokens of an act type which may lead some to categorize computer ethics as a branch of applied or practical ethics.” Due to the nature of computer-mediated discourse, the problems of confidentiality and anonymity seem to be central to the ethical focus.

Johnson further notes that “[i]n an “information society” privacy is a major concern in that much (though by no means all) of the information gathered and processed is information about individuals” (Johnson, 2001:70). This concern brings to attention the anonymity of the participants and the integrity of the data source. The two problems are actually two faces of the same coin. On the one hand, the techniques of anonymity and pseudonymity are commonly used in social research to protect the participants’ rights of confidentiality. They aim to prevent the participants’ real identities from exposure. On the other, the issue of anonymity could become a concern for the credibility of the research data. The nature of computer-mediated discourse, which enables people to hide their true identities, can affect the truthfulness of the data. Frankel & Siang (1999:5) point out that “In Internet research, researchers may encounter the presence of pseudonyms in place of ‘real’ identities.” However, Clarke offers the helpful suggestion that the online identity of the participants is “the association of data with a particular human being” (Clarke, 1997b). This means



that we must see people's online identity, which people invest by expressing opinions, making affiliations, or carrying out tasks, is just as 'real' as it is elsewhere in the world. This view, which reflects the constructivist approach to reality, echoes my own ontological position. Healy & Perry (2000: 119) propose that "[r]esearching this constructed reality depends on interactions between interviewer and respondent ...". Their assertion points out the interactive process of constructing 'reality' between the researcher and the participants. In line with this view, I argue that the identities of the participants were not merely the identifications of their names or professions as indicated in their pre-survey questionnaires; the participants' presentations of self with their e-pals during their email correspondence also contributed to their online identities as a whole.

Since this project is concerned with the investigation of meaning negotiation during the participants' email correspondence, the disclosure of the participants' feelings and thoughts in their emails were a focus of the analysis. Needless to say, the accessing and studying people's private emails inevitably raises ethical concerns. Thus, it was important for this research to make the participants aware of the possible risks and allow them to decide whether they would join after weighing the advantages and disadvantages of taking part in the project. On this basis, the security measures which I took to safeguard the participants' autonomy and anonymity were three-fold: a) the informed-consent form; b) private email addresses; c) pseudonyms.

a) Informed-consent form

Informed-consent forms were sent to the participants before the research project began. Inside these forms, the research project was introduced. The benefits for the participants of joining this research project were stated, along with the work entailed.

The procedure for taking part in the research project was illustrated, for example sending copies of their emails to the researcher, composing a weekly e-journal, completing a pre-survey questionnaire and participating in e-interviews. The participants were apprised of the ways in which their pseudonymous emails and information would be used in the research. Finally, the form indicated that the participants retained the right of withdrawing from the project. This was all done to make sure that the participants knew exactly what they were entitled to and what they would need to do if they decided to participate. In order to make the participants feel more secure, my name, my affiliation with the University of Birmingham and my contact information were included in the form.

Mann & Stewart (2000:48) point out that the consent form is “perhaps the *key issue* to be addressed anew when creating a framework for ethical online research practice.” Since it would have been difficult to post a written consent form to the participants in different countries, an online consent form was emailed to them (see 3.4.2). Participants were asked to read through the content of the consent form and then type in their name and the date at the bottom of the form. They would also need to check the box which indicated their willingness to join the project before submitting the form. I would then receive a copy of their consent forms via the Internet. The completion of the consent form, to some extent, would signify that both the participants and I agreed to conform to the stated rules.

#### b) Private email address

The participants were given the choices either of using their own email accounts or using the ones provided by me for the use of their email exchanges with their e-pals. This right to conceal their private email address from other participants was stated in

the pre-survey questionnaire. Although all participants decided to use their own email accounts, my alternative was listed as an option, in an attempt to protect their privacy.

c) Pseudonyms.

During the actual email correspondence, all the participants were introduced to each other by their real names (the names were identical to the names provided in the pre-survey questionnaire). Most of the Taiwanese participants, though they had Chinese names, still chose to use their English names. However, during the data analysis, in order to protect the participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of the data source, all the participants were given pseudonyms.

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the methodological framework of the research. The data collection and data analysis have been discussed in relation to the research aims and questions. To summarise, this research is a qualitative grounded ethnographically-informed discourse study, wherein I draw upon speech act theory and politeness theory to investigate how a group of Chinese and English speakers negotiated and developed intercultural understanding via email and examine the online qualitative data through a theoretically informed lens. Conceptually informed by the ethnography of communication (see Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 1989; Gumperz, 2001), this research considers that the understanding of intercultural communication in email should be built on an exploration of the participants' email correspondence, in which they negotiate their views, norms of interactions and values. Intercultural understanding, in this regard, is the process of meaning formation between people from different national backgrounds. With this rationale, it has been

argued that the investigation of intercultural communication requires in-depth observations of the participants' email correspondence. For this reason, I contend that the qualitative paradigm should be suitable. I have discussed the research methods employed in this study and showed how they were administered in the research project. The research sources included a pre-survey questionnaire, e-mails, e-journals and e-interviews.

In terms of the data analysis, it has been pointed out that, due to the asynchronous nature of email communication, the investigation of online intercultural communication requires a research paradigm which could take into consideration the features of computer-mediated discourse. It is hoped that the qualitative data-driven understanding of email intercultural communication could shed some light on the interplay between computer-mediated communication and intercultural understanding.

Finally, the ethical issues which revolve around the computer-mediated communication have been discussed. In order to protect the participants' autonomy and anonymity, an informed-consent form, private email address and pseudonym were features of this research project. In the following chapters, Chapters 4, 5 and 6, a data analysis for each pair will be presented.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data Analysis I**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Previous chapters introduced the theoretical framework underlying this study and the methodology used to investigate intercultural communication via email. The chapters to come will present the data analysis of this research. The data analysis is discussed in three chapters – Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Each chapter contains three individual analyses. Each analysis is conducted according to the data analysis procedure (see 3.3.1.1). Before each analysis, the participants' backgrounds are described. Next, the communicative event of the critical email exchange of the pair is summarised. The actual analysis consists of two sections: a speech act analysis and an (im)politeness analysis of each participant. Finally, the findings of the communicative event are summarised.

The structuring of these analysis chapters is related to the interactants' face negotiations. Goffman notes that "[o]ne's own face and the face of others are constructs of the same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved"(Goffman,1967:5-6). Similarly, it is also my view that even though face negotiations are omnipresent during our interactions with other people, the weighting of the attention which we have given to our face needs or other people's face needs in each encounter can vary. This means that in one communicative event, one could place more emphasise on supporting other people's needs (i.e. comforting a friend who has just failed an exam) or one could emphasise more one's own face needs in another communicative event (i.e. being accused of stealing money). In other situations, one could manage to maintain the

equilibrium between other people's and one's own needs. In choosing how to group the pairs I have paid attention to the weighting management of face needs. I do this because weight management provides further contextualised explanations to how (im)politeness strategies are utilised to support the interactants' communicative goals. The three chapters contain similar weighting in managing their own and their epals' faces. In Chapter 4, the three analyses show how the interactants mainly aim to protect their own faces. In contrast to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 shows that the interactants' emphasis is placed on supporting their epals' faces. In Chapter 6, the face-work between the interactants shows concern for both their own and their epals' faces. The investigation of the (im)politeness meaning in relation to their face needs will be considered within the framework of the communication event. The themes presented in each chapter are shown in the table below. The themes were also summarised in 3.5.2.

	<b>Chapter 4</b>			<b>Chapter 5</b>			<b>Chapter 6</b>		
<b>Chapters</b>	4.2	4.3	4.4	5.2	5.3	5.4	6.2	6.3	6.4
	Pair 1	Pair 2	Pair3	Pair4	Pair5	Pair6	Pair7	Pair8	Pair9
<b>Events</b>	9/11 Event	Proposing	Interview advice	Dieting	Relationship issues	Offensive questions	Near accident	Avoiding political topics	Apologising for the long email

Table 4.1 The arrangement of the data analysis chapters

To begin with, this chapter presents three analyses in turn in 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4. They show how the interactants make their own face needs the priority and, as a consequence, affect their relationship with their epals. In 4.2, the interactants expressed their different views about the 9/11 event. The strong disagreement between the two participants resulted in conflicts. In 4.3, the participant discussed his proposing plan with his epal. However, his short email writing style caused his epal to have unpleasant feelings. In 4.4, the communicative event was that the participant

admitted her inexperience in having interviews and asked her epal for some interview advice. Without showing further interests in her interview experience, her epal took the role of an advisor and briefly offered a few suggestions.

## **4.2 Pair 1- 9/11 event**

### **4.2.1 Participants' profiles**

#### **Keith**

Keith was a 62-year-old male American who worked in real-estate management. He was interested in Chinese culture and for three years had studied Chinese by himself. He learned about this project from an online Chinese forum – EZ Mandarin – and thought that it might be helpful for learning Chinese. Apart from this ambition, another reason for his joining the project was that he was perplexed by a comment from one of his Chinese friends about American and Chinese cultural differences. He hoped that the exchange with a native Chinese speaker might help him to clarify some “cultural issues”.

#### **Ed**

Ed was a 25-year-old male Taiwanese who was majoring in Chinese. He was also a part-time Chinese teacher. He learned about this project from my post on a Bulletin Board System (BBS) in the National Taiwan Normal University. He had had experience of language exchanges with foreign speakers, but this was the first time that he had embarked on an intercultural contact via email.

### **4.2.2 Communicative event**

This communicative event took place during the email correspondence between Keith and Ed, who demonstrated opposing opinions on the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>

2001 (henceforward 9/11). This event occurred in the 6<sup>th</sup> week of their email correspondence. The disagreement over 9/11 provoked a confrontation between the pair. The data analysis placed particular focus on this event which appeared salient according to the observations from Keith and Ed's email entries, e-journals and e-interviews. Watts (2003) emphasises the importance of contextualized interpretations. He suggests that the evaluation of polite or impolite, "is not merely a matter of the linguistic expressions . . . but rather depends on the interpretation of that behaviour in the overall social interaction" (Watts, 2003:8). Holmes also points out that politeness is 'content dependent' (1995:21). That is to say, in order to more accurately interpret the data, we need to pay attention to the elements which constitute (im)politeness in the interaction. In line with the notion of the analysis based on context, the investigation and interpretation of the presented data were based on observation of the process of the email interactions between the participant and the support, as shown in their e-journals and e-interviews.

In what follows, I show the confrontational situation which emerged over the topic of the September 11<sup>th</sup> events.

Keith and Ed took turns to initiate topics for their discussions. They talked about 'racism', 'friendship' and 'politics'. The communicative event involving this pair which was targeted for analysis was their expression of different views on the issue of 'September 11'. It occurred in the 6<sup>th</sup> week of their email correspondence. During the week of the September 11 anniversary, Keith wrote an email to express his grief about the victims and his resentment of terrorism. Instead of showing sympathy at the tragedy, Ed challenged the idea that terrorists should take full responsibility for what had happened. Ed's reply provoked some major arguments which led to serious tension. Ed's view was that there was a reason for what had happened at the World



Trade Centre. Keith's main argument was that people should tolerate different voices in a democratic country and that there was no excuse for what the terrorists had done.

Below are extracts from the actual emails between these two participants (see appendix 8 for full email entries). The numbers next to the sentences correspond to the actual line numbers in each email. All the word capitalizations, underlinings and parentheses and boldface are verbatim from the emails.

Extract A: Week 6 Ed to Keith

1	I'll be a temporary teacher in a language center for three weeks. It's really a
2	challenge. I've never taught students from different countries all at the same
3	Time and yesterday was the first day.
	***
11	About your letter, I'm sorry to say: "It really made me feel disappointed."
12	Your attitude in the mail really expressed the prejudice of Americans.
13	Thus my thoughts:
14	People said that people without international viewpoint are Americans. I
15	Agree with it only at times. Democracy is a really a great contribution from
16	occidental to the whole world and I so agree that United States is one of the
17	Most democratic country in the world. However, after all, democracy is
18	something from Western World. Nobody can assume that it would work
19	everywhere. I had a roommate from United States, a fiery-spirited guy
20	Who is eager to promote democracy to the world. But have you ever thought
21	that people in different countries, different cultures, need different political
22	systems? I agree that logically, democracy is the fairest politic system so far
23	and most of countries in the world try to put it into practice. Do you know
24	that McDonalds sells hamburger to the world, but they still sell hamburgers
25	that made of rice in Taiwan? Do you consider that American is always the
26	way?
27	About the religious fanatic, do you really think they just attacked United
28	States for your different viewpoint? I don't really know what American
29	soldiers have done in Middle East, but what I knew from the TV was, when
30	the world trade was attacked. Muslim children were dancing and singing
31	On the street. Why even the children got inspired from the attack? Do they
32	like to see people get hurt? Or they have been really bored for a long time?
33	(Maybe since they were born) If someone does the same thing to you, no,
34	matter how angry you would be, sometimes you may think: "what did I do
35	to make you hate me so much?"
36	Sorry for didn't comfort you about the 911, but as your friend, I'd like to tell
37	you what are my true thoughts and feelings. So many people asked me, as a
38	Chinese major, why I always make foreign friends. "If you want a
39	globalized world but not just westernized world, we need some orient
40	horizon.
41	Your friend from different world, Ed

(\*\*\* some intervening sentences are omitted)

Extract B: Week 6 Keith to Ed

3	Like many people across the world, your email indicates an unwillingness to
4	accept the fact that the religious fanatics wish to kill everyone who disagrees
5	with them—including you and me. They do kill fellow Muslims who do not
6	practice the Muslim faith in the same way. They kill Muslims who come to
7	reject the religion. They openly say that “compromise” is not possible in
8	their view of Islam. Just as we judge friends by word and deed, <u>we must also</u>
9	<u>judge enemies by what they say and what they do.</u> To put this issue in
10	perspective: <u>Last year there were about 11,000 terrorists attacks across the</u>
11	<u>world with about 4,200 occurring OUTSIDE Iraq.</u>
	***
25	<b>It is not necessary for the U.S. and Coalition forces to</b>
26	<b>win. But it IS absolutely essential to the terrorists that transformational</b>
27	<b>democracy <u>not</u> occur.</b>
28	Who do you think will prevail? I still believe in the common sense and
29	character of the Iraqi people. But, I expect the larger conflict to last for at
30	least 20-50 years, long after Coalition forces have left Iraq.
	*** (Keith elaborated on the value of democracy.)
58	Re: your approach to teaching Chinese. There may be people for whom
59	the immersion method works. Unfortunately, it is a most discouraging
60	waste of time for me. Wishing you success in your teaching.

(\*\*\* indicates that sentences have been omitted) (Bold and underlining as in original)

As a result of this interchange, two weeks later Keith and Ed gave up writing to one another. They both commented in their e-interviews that the conflict had arisen only after they started the discussions about 9/11. The conflict eventually cut short their interactions. Mills suggests that “impoliteness only exists when it is classified as such by certain, usually dominant, community members and/or when it leads to a breakdown in relations” (Mills, 2002). In order to gain more understanding about what they wrote which caused the breakdown of the relationship, the extracts from Keith and Ed’s emails are examined in turn. The analysis of this communication breakdown is helpful because it allows us to reflect on the conflict situation as due to a failure in the flow of meaning negotiation, rather than as product of certain verbal presentations. With an in-depth analysis of the two emails, this chapter will seek to show how the perception of politeness or impoliteness is constructed in the context.

The examination of (im)politeness strategies in discourse will be made in terms of the meanings of the email sentences in the overall context.

### **4.2.3 Analysis of Ed's email**

#### **4.2.3.1 Ed's Speech act analysis**

In Ed's email, he mainly aimed to address his opposite position to Keith's in the discussion of the September 11<sup>th</sup> event. Instead of hedging his opinions, Ed was upfront and bold in criticising Keith's political views. His goal was to declare his political position on 9/11 and also to challenge Keith's views on 'terrorism'.

Engaging himself in the confrontational discussion, Ed ignored hedging devices. Ed's intention in confronting Keith's position on 'terrorism' is clear from his first sentence, when he starts with the topic of 'September 11<sup>th</sup>'. He says, "About your letter, I'm sorry to say: "It really made me feel disappointed." Your attitude in the mail really expressed the prejudice of America" (Extract A, lines 11 & 12). According to Searle, if a speaker apologises, it is because he believes that he has taken a previous action which might offend or affect others. In other words, the offensive act has taken place before the apology. However, according to this definition, the prerequisite condition for Ed's apology is absent. Before making the apology, Ed was writing something about his own teaching, which was neither relevant to 9/11 nor offensive to Keith. Moreover, immediately before the apology, Ed specifically pointed out that he wished to switch the discussion to Keith's previous email regarding 9/11. In this context, it is not difficult to see that Ed's apology was not addressed to something he had done before, but to something he was about to do, namely his next comments about Keith's email. I argue that, instead of seeing Ed's apology as a redressive act for a prior offence, it should be considered the initiation of his opposing opinions.

Ed in parentheses pointed out what he was apologising for (“It really made me feel disappointed.”). The sentence in parentheses seemed to be the focus of Ed’s point, which was the expression of his own feelings. Syntactically speaking, the sentence indicated that the object’s (‘me’) feeling (‘disappointed’) was aroused by the subject (it). Taking the whole sentence, the subject (‘it’) stands for ‘your email’. Thus in semantic terms, Ed was expressing his disappointment about something Keith wrote in his last email.

After stating his own views, Ed listed a series of questions (lines 27, 28, 31-35). Asking questions is classified as a speech act of directives since it usually involves an attempt to get someone to answer the questions. I want to deal with lines 31-35 in particular, since these questions demonstrated a strong functional role in the context. Ed asked a series of questions in lines 31 and 32, regarding the reactions of the Iraqi children when they learnt about the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack. Using question form is considered as a politeness strategy to soften the speaker’s intended utterance. It is regarded as a form of hedging device in the sense that the communicative intentions are modified by not presupposing cooperation from the hearer, i.e. “Won’t you open the door?” (Brown & Levinson, 1987:145). However, I would argue that questions are not always intended for hedging purposes. The ways in which the questions are asked determine the actual functions of the questions. Ed’s email is a good example of using questions as an interrogating device to enforce his status and claims.

Ed asked three questions in a row (‘Why even the children got inspired from the attack? Do they like to see people get hurt? Or they have been really bored for a long time?’) The first question is a WH question which usually requires a more elaborate answer. The second and third question were both Yes/No questions, such as require a definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in the response. The answers to these two Yes/No questions were

apparent to common judgments. Thus, it can be suggested that these two questions are hints for guiding people to the answers which Ed has in mind. Ed first proposed a question which needs an explanation in the answer and then offered two more Yes/No questions as prompts to the intended answer to the first question.

Following this series of questions, he asked another question before the end of the email. In lines 33-35 ('If someone does the same thing to you, no matter how angry you would be, sometimes you may think: "what did I do to make you hate me so much?"'). This question was embedded in a sentence which posed a hypothesis. It was not intended for the reader to reply. Instead, it was meant to ask the reader to put himself in that position and ask himself the question. Thus, the function of the question was not to seek an answer, but to ask for the reader's self-examination. Working collaboratively with the series of questions (lines 27& 28), the invitation to examination seems also to provide the answers to the previous questions. From the flow of the context, it seems reasonable to suggest that none of those questions are truly asking for answers. Rather, they are used to persuade and guide the reader to realise what the writer thinks the correct answers are.

Judging from the way in which Ed structured his argument, it is not difficult to see that Ed's attitude was different from Keith's. After discussing some of the speech acts used in Ed's email, I move to investigate the (im)politeness meaning carried in the speech acts.

#### **4.2.3.2 Ed's (Im)politeness strategies**

In the above discussion, it was concluded that Ed's goal was to confront Keith's views on 'terrorism'. His intention was made clear from the first sentence when he started talking about the topic of 'September 11<sup>th</sup>'. He said, 'About your letter, I'm

sorry to say: “It really made me feel disappointed.” Your attitude in the mail really expressed the prejudice of America.’ (Extract A, lines 11 & 12). The opening statement is upfront and judgmental. The comment was made out of Ed’s evaluation of Keith’s email. Since the evaluation is negative, Ed’s statement may have seriously damaged Keith’s face. Ed specifically uses the pronoun ‘me’ and a possessive pronoun ‘your’ in his statement. The statement was made without hedging or redress. It is clear that he wished the person who was under the spotlight to be under no illusion. In this case, it was Keith to whom Ed was referring. The sentence (‘It really made me feel disappointed’) shows that Ed empowered himself to pass judgment on Keith’s argument.

Disagreement by its nature is a face-threatening act, which endangers the harmony of the interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987:66). Brown & Levinson propose that the seriousness of the face-threatening act (FTA) involves considerations of ‘distance’, ‘power’ and ‘ranking’. The FTA generated by Ed’s statement is closely related to the power issue. Brown & Levinson argue that “individuals are assigned an absolute value on this dimension that measures the power that each individual has relative to all others” (Brown & Levinson, 1987:78). This is to say that we are given certain value and power by the society we belong to. The judgment made by Ed, a 25-year-old postgraduate student, to Keith, a 62-year-old male real-estate agent, might have disturbed the balance of their relationship. First of all, they had only known each other for a few weeks; therefore they did not yet have a stable and firm friendship. Second, their understanding of what ‘politeness’ means seems to vary. Ed reported in his e-interview that he was being deliberately polite in expressing his opinions because he respected Keith as an older person. However, his utterance still evidently provoked Keith and led to the eventual communication breakdown.

A similar FTA was conducted again in lines 14 &15 ('People said that people without international viewpoint are Americans. I agree with it only at times'.) Again, Ed highlighted his position as an evaluator by using the subject pronoun 'I'. Since in the previous sentences, Ed had just expressed his negative feelings about Keith's email, the inference can be drawn that lines 14 and 15 are meant to reinforce his argument. As Keith is an American, Ed's negative evaluation of Americans could be seen by Keith as a personal innuendo that he as an American who knows little about the world.

After showing his disapproval, Ed continued to question the integrity of America's political decision in Iraq (lines 27, 28, 31-35). He asked several rhetorical questions to pinpoint his argument. Holmes defines questions whose nature is to challenge and attack another's position as antagonistic questions (Holmes, 1995). Ed's questions are meant to belittle Keith's opinions and assert his own. Thus these questions seem to be antagonistic questions by their nature. For example, the series of questions in lines 31 &32 ("Why even the children got inspired from the attack? Do they like to see people get hurt? Or they have been really bored for a long time?") depict very contrastive image of 'children' being 'happy about the attack'. Children are normally associated with innocence and harmlessness. Ed deliberately juxtaposes 'children' with 'violence' in order to make the answer to his questions even more apparent. Since the answers to the first two Yes/No questions (lines 31 &32) are apparent to common judgments, it is speculated that the two questions were hints to guide people to the answers which Ed had in mind.

Yet another question is asked before the end of the email. In lines 33-35, Ed states, 'If someone does the same thing to you, no matter how angry you would be, sometimes you may think: 'what did I do to make you hate me so much?'''. This

question is embedded in a sentence with hypothetical form. Ed asks Keith to put himself in these people's shoes. Thus, the function of the question is not to seek an answer, but to ask Keith to embark on self-examination. Holmes notes that an aggressive negative question "is likely to attract admiration from others who regard interaction as a competitive activity and so increase the social status of the challenger" (Holmes, 1995: 47). She points out in particular that men are more likely than women to ask hostile questions. Her argument is confirmed by Ed's e-interview responses. "I have the feelings that there is always a sense of competition when talking to male foreign friends. Sometimes the competition will not be harmful but sometimes will. And this feeling also applies to my relationship with Keith."

Following this analysis, it can be seen that the questions here are used to support Ed's own argument and challenge Keith's opinions. Yet conventionally, in Brown & Levinson, asking questions is regarded as a form of hedging device in the sense that the communicative intentions are modified so as not to presuppose cooperation from the hearer, e.g., "Won't you open the door?" (Brown & Levinson, 1987:145). However, I would argue with earlier work, since we see here that questions are not always intended for hedging purposes. The ways in which the questions are asked may determine the real functions of the question. Searle (1979) also points out that the surface form of an expression cannot sufficiently determine the meaning of a proposition.

#### **4.2.4 Analysis of Keith's email**

##### **4.2.4.1 Keith's speech act analysis**

In response to Ed's negative comments, Keith prepared a list of reasons and items of evidence to support his argument. The two most noticeable speech acts



applied in the context were an assertive speech act and expressive speech act (see Searle, 1979).

a. Assertive speech act

Keith's views on terrorists were criticised by Ed. To justify his views, Keith reported a number of attacks in the world the year before (lines 10 & 11). The statistical report, though he did not specify its source, revealed Keith's strong belief in the truthfulness of the statement. Therefore, this statement was categorised as a speech act of assertion, which is a speech act aiming to describe a state of affairs in the world.

Keith's strong belief can be detected from the two linguistic devices in the sentence:

1) Ellipsis:

<u>Last year there were about 11,000 terrorists attacks across the world with about 4,200 occurring OUTSIDE Iraq.</u>
---

(lines 10 & 11)

In the statement, Keith provided two sets of statistics. The first (11,000) and the second (4,200) figures both referred to the number of terrorist attacks. However the phrase 'terrorists attacks' was omitted when mentioning the second figure, 4,200. Readers need to make links from the context in order to infer the missing information. Reading between the lines, not only can we do this, but we can also link with it our background knowledge about the things related to the terrorists attacks, such as suicide-bombings, damages, killings. The embedded meaning is what makes this statistical information so important in this context.

2) Underlining and Capitalization:

Underlining is frequently used as a reading technique to emphasise and focus on what the writer is saying. It was possible that Keith adopted the technique in his writing in order to catch Ed's attention. Besides underlining, Keith also capitalized the

word ‘OUTSIDE’. It can be interpreted that not only has Keith tried to demonstrate the seriousness of the terrorists’ activities, but he also wishes to remind us how close we are to the terrorists’ acts, since many of them occurred “OUTSIDE” Iraq.

Unlike face-to-face interaction, virtual interaction lacks paralinguistic cues, such as body language or tones. In order to communicate more effectively, people have different ways in their virtual interaction to assist the transmission of meaning. Combining the use of underlining and capitalizing words displays the degree of certainty this statement is seeking to display. Moreover, they seem to intensify the ‘tone’ of the writer.

b. Expressive speech act

The purpose of Keith’s email was to elaborate on his thoughts and feelings about terrorism. Naturally, expressing opinions is an important part of this email. For example:

<b>It is not necessary for the U.S. and Coalition forces to win. But it IS absolutely essential to the terrorists that transformational democracy <u>not</u> occur.</b>
---

(Lines 25-27)

Although the subject ‘I’ was not used in the sentences, it contained implicatures for a reader to realise that they expressed Keith’s opinion. First, the argument is bold-faced. Since we have seen Keith varying the printed forms of his words to indicate his ‘tone’ in expressing his ideas, the bold-face used for these words seems to have similar functions. Second, Keith used the adverbs ‘not necessary’ and ‘absolutely’ to signal the degree of difference between the first sentence and second sentence. By showing the degree of difference, the second sentence took priority over the first. It made the idea that ‘terrorists do not compromise’ stand out. And this result

was coherent with Keith's earlier argument. Thus, even though the sentences appear agentless, they still function to express Keith's ideas.

Another example of a speech act of expression can be seen below. After expressing his opinion about the terrorists' mindset, Keith posed a question.

Who do you think will prevail? I still believe in the common sense and character of the Iraqi people.
---

(Lines 28 & 29)

Keith first asked a question and then implicitly answered it himself. At first glance, the WH question may give the impression that it was a speech act of requesting, in which seeking an answer was the main concern. However, I would argue that this is a rhetorical question used as a lead-in to the latter answer. The sentence following the question indicates that the true answer entails the 'common sense' and 'character' of the Iraqi people. These two terms 'common sense' and 'character' help to ratify Keith's idea as the correct answer.

#### **4.2.4.2 Keith's (im)politeness analysis**

Locher (2004:5) notes, "conflict is inherent in both the exercise of power and disagreement ..." Locher's argument rightly points out the inseparability of a 'power exercise' from confrontational talk. Ed's direct disagreement with Keith belittles Keith's justice in condemning terrorism. Emotionally provoked by Ed's adversarial statements, Keith questions Ed's views and buttresses his position with supportive evidence. Keith's emails aim to protect his own face by endorsing his argument and disputing Ed's assertion.

As discussed in Ed's (im)politeness strategies, Ed empowers himself by offering judgments about Keith's opinions. Ed's statement ("It really made me feel disappointed") damages Keith's face for, in expressing sorrow over 9/11, Keith may have been seeking comfort and agreement rather than disagreement. The gap between what Keith might have been expecting and what he actually received increases the damage to Keith's face.

Thus, in order to protect his face, Keith structures his argument in a way similar to Ed's email, which was to begin the contention by expressing a negative judgment on Ed's email.

Like many people across the world, your email indicates an unwillingness to accept the fact that the religious fanatics wish to kill everyone who disagrees with them—including you and me.
---

(Lines 3-5)

It is worth noting in this sentence that Keith's own opinion claims to be related to a 'fact', whereas Ed's argument is associated with a feeling: 'unwillingness to accept' a fact. Since Keith considers Ed's contending opinions about 9/11 as 'unwillingness to accept' a fact, Keith may be implying that Ed's argument is an irrational reaction to terrorism.

Following his opening statement, Keith displays a list of reasons explaining why the terrorists' actions are unforgivable. There are several (im)politeness strategies involved in accentuating his focal points:

a. Presupposing common ground:

Keith states in lines 4 & 5, 'religious fanatics wish to kill everyone who disagrees with them—including you and me.' The term 'religious fanatics' in the sentence does not refer to all strongly religious people. Since the flow of the

discussion is focused on ‘terrorism’, it can be inferred that Keith is speaking of the terrorists who believe they are doing justice on God’s behalf. By making a dichotomy between the terrorists and people like Keith and Ed, Keith is presupposing that he and Ed are similar people who are not religious fanatics. Keith may have been trying to show Ed that Ed should be on Keith’s side, since they share similar values. Brown & Levinson claim that “the manipulation of such presuppositions where something is not really mutually assumed to be the case, but S speaks as if it were mutually assumed, can be turned to positive-face redress ... ” (1987:122). In other words, it is a strategy to claim that the interlocutor and the speaker are people who share the same values. Brown & Levinson’s assertion is made on the basis that the speaker intentionally presupposes that s/he has common ground with the hearer, in order to show that the speaker knows the hearer’s wants and tastes, which could then satisfy the desire of the hearer to save face (the desire to be cared for). However, in Keith and Ed’s case, even though Keith does claim common ground with Ed, I argue that Keith’s intention is not to maintain Ed’s face, but to protect his own face and support his own arguments. By including Ed and himself in this ‘killing’ scenario (lines 4 & 5), Keith personalizes the matter for both of them. A message ‘we are all in the same boat’ is delivered with this sentence. This declaration of common ground facilitates his argument because it makes Keith’s role seem less subjective.

b. Bald-on-record:

The purpose of Keith’s email is to elaborate on his thoughts and feelings about terrorism. Naturally, expressing opinions is an important part of his email. In lines 25-27, he says:

**It is not necessary for the U.S. and Coalition forces to win. But it IS absolutely essential to the terrorists that transformational democracy not occur.**

(Bold and underline as in original)

Keith's argument is accentuated in two respects. First, it is bold-faced. Altering the presentation of words in the context seemed to be quite common in Keith's email. He varies the forms of the words in his emails to show degrees of importance by such means as underlining, capitalization and bold-face. For example, in Week 6, Ed wrote that there were certain aspects of Chinese culture with which Keith was not familiar. Keith then wrote in his Week 6 email: "I would need specific examples to begin to understand some of the differences. **If you have time, write about a couple of real life scenarios that illustrate your experiences.**" Bold-faced words are used here to stress how important Keith thinks it is to learn about cultural difference through examples. Judging from this observation of his writing routine, it seems safe to suggest that Keith varies the presentation of words to indicate stressed content in his emails.

Second, different presentations of words can be found in line 25, where Keith particularly stresses his point by capitalizing the second verb, 'IS'. In order to show comparison, Keith writes the first 'is' in lower case and the second 'IS' in capital letters. The capitalized 'IS' is followed by an adverb 'absolutely', to signal his strong certainty in this statement. By showing these degrees of difference, the second sentence takes priority over the first one. It makes the idea that 'terrorists do not compromise' stand out. And this result is coherent with Keith's earlier argument. Then Keith continues:

Who do you think will prevail? I still believe in the common sense and character of the Iraqi people.

(Lines 28 &29)

Since Keith immediately points out the answer as revealing itself in the question, the question itself should be considered rhetorical. “In general, a rhetorical question has the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked” (Han 2002:202). Keith’s question seems to conform to Han’s definition of a rhetorical question.

In addition to its literal meaning, Keith’s rhetorical question may carry some implicatures. The sentence following the question indicates that the true answer presupposes the ‘common sense’ and ‘character’ of the Iraqi people. These two terms ‘common sense’ and ‘character’ help to ratify Keith’s idea as the correct answer. By paralleling common sense and character with his arguments, Keith implies that the opposite opinions betray ‘no common sense’ and ‘no character’.

As shown in the above discussion, Keith’s statements seem to be directed to supporting his own arguments. In my view, Keith may consider that Ed has deliberately turned their casual talk into a debate. Thus, Keith’s primary goal in replying to Ed’s email is to defend his own face. Brown & Levinson also suggest that the prime occasion for adopting an obvious and bald-on-record strategy is “whenever S wants to do the FTA with maximum efficiency more than he wants to satisfy H’s face” (1987: 95). By presenting his argument in bold-faced, underlined and in a series of rhetorical questions, Keith appears to wish to transmit his message in the most effective way, which is first to catch the Ed’s attention.

#### c. Face-attacking

Apart from expressing his different views, some comments unrelated to the 9/11 topics are also made in Keith’s email. Taking Ed’s comments as an unfriendly challenge, Keith appeared to be emotionally provoked. Keith deliberately attacked

Ed's face by making a negative comment on Ed's teaching ("Re: your approach to teaching Chinese. There may be people for whom the immersion method works. Unfortunately, it is a most discouraging waste of time for me".) As his profile notes, Ed is a part-time Chinese teacher. Thus, in Ed's email (lines 1-3), he shared his part-time teaching experience with Keith. It is possible that Keith's negative comment about Ed's teaching was a sign of Keith's anger being vented. Since Keith had never been Ed's student, Keith's criticism might have been deliberately made to attack Ed's face and confidence.

After criticising Ed's teaching, Keith added, "Wishing you success in your teaching". Judging from the flow of the context, this wish is very unlikely to have been sincere. In general, irony involves a contradiction between appearance and reality. Thus, Keith's wish here is more likely to be ironic. Perret (1976:F2) defines irony as a 'value judgment that is more positive than the circumstances deserve' (quoted in Brown & Levinson, 1987:262). Brown & Levinson note that irony has "an essential FTA content", which should be construed as a criticism (p.203). Since this final remark is irrelevant to the main topic of this email, I suspect that this comment was prompted by Keith's emotional reaction to Ed's opinions about 9/11. Keith reflected in his e-interview that he should not have talked about this topic, because "the issue of 911/Iraq which is very emotional for many people, is not something everyone wants to talk about or revisit".

#### **4.2.5. Discussion**

Due to the absence of physical contact in email interactions, the moods of the speech can be delivered only through words. In this email correspondence, Ed and Keith express their own opinions and challenge the other person's stance by setting



the ‘tone’ of their emails in a relatively aggressive way. Since the form of this email correspondence is that of a debate on the issue of 9/11 and terrorism, the tone of both Keith and Ed’s email appears to be offensive and competitive. Instead of showing sympathy toward the 9/11 tragedy when Keith expresses his sorrow, Ed overtly questions and challenges Keith’s condemnation of terrorists. Ed is upfront and direct in expressing his views. Ed’s email incurs Keith’s negative response and eventually leads to their ending the interaction.

In this debate genre, in order to fulfil their communicative purposes, Ed and Keith use question formulas (i.e. rhetorical questions) and different presentations of words (i.e., underlined, boldface) in the emails to signify variations of ‘tone’. Ilie (1999) proposes that “[a] rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser’s commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee’s mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity” (Ilie, 1999:128, cited in Schaffer, 2005:434). Agreeing with Ilie, I think that both interactants use rhetorical questions to challenge the other person’s arguments and, at the same time, stress their own views.

A negotiation of power emerges during the interactions. Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory has been used as the main analytical framework to investigate the strategies employed in the presented emails. It has been pointed out in this analysis that some strategies which they consider polite may in fact carry face-threatening meanings. For instance, Brown & Levinson consider questions to be a hedging device for modifying the force of a speech act. However, in contrast to the function of hedging opinions, the questions in both Ed and Keith’s emails work to enforce and stress their arguments. Thus, it is concluded that the meaning of (im)politeness should be seen in relation to its context.

### **4.3 Pair 2 –Proposing**

#### **4.3.1 Participants' profiles**

##### Matthew

Matthew, 23-year-old American Vietnamese, was the treasurer-elect of the Vietnamese community of San Diego. He was also a part-time realtor and a quality control specialist for the county of San Diego. He enjoyed talking about topics such as business, politics and philosophy. He had been learning Chinese for a year and he wanted to practise his Chinese by exchanging emails with his Taiwanese e-pal.

##### Chloe

Chloe, a 25-year-old Taiwanese, was a graduate student in linguistics. She had been learning English for 14 years. She had been to some English-speaking countries, such as the US, England and Australia. By joining the project, Chloe thought she would share and exchange life experiences with her e-pal from a different cultural background.

#### **4.3.2 Communicative event**

Matthew and Chloe started their email with some general topics, like cultures, politics and holidays. They rarely engaged in any of those discussions for too long (usually within one email exchange). It was not until week 8 that they began to write something more personal. In week 8, Matthew asked Chloe for some suggestions for his girlfriend's birthday gift. In the following week, Matthew asked Chloe's opinions about how to win a girl's heart and make a proposal. They had a few exchanges regarding this topic. Chloe gave Matthew some advice from her own experience. Then, in week 11, Matthew dropped a line to say that he was thinking about proposing

in a hot air balloon. The discussion about proposing continued for four emails. Each of the email contained about one to three sentences. The length of their emails in week 11 (78 words) appeared to be significantly short in comparison with their previous emails (709 words). This change began in week 10 after Chloe wrote a relatively long email (252 words) about relationships, using her own experience. Matthew replied with only two lines: “I understand, the message that needs to be conveyed. You may go overseas to study, will that affect your relationship in anyway?” After this short email, Chloe started to cut the length of her emails.

Chloe made a comment about this situation in her e-interview, “I didn’t feel so good to say a lot while he only responded a little.” As a result of her feelings, Chloe altered the length of her email significantly, from 504 words in week 10 to 50 words in week 11. Even though Chloe shortened the length of her emails, she still managed to express her opinions and keep the conversations going. This analysis presents how face can be negotiated through alterations of linguistic choices, terms of address and the length of emails. It attempts to investigate how attitudes and emotions are transmitted through the writer’s email style. In order to better present the flow of the context, four email correspondences are presented below. The analysis, however, will focus mainly focus on the last two emails (email E and email F).

Extract C.Week11 Chloe to Matthew

1	My boyfriend will go with me. So there won’t be a distance problem. :)
2	Have you come up with any good idea for proposal yet?
4	Chloe

Extract D. Week 11 Matthew to Chloe

1	how about on a hot air balloon?
2	
3	M

Extract E. Week11 Chloe to Matthew

1	Matt,
2	Are you serious? hmm...sounds interesting! It's special and somehow
3	"private." I can feel the romance now.
4	When are you planning to propose?
5	
6	Chloe

Extract F. Week 11 Matthew to Chloe

1	Yeah I am serious, sometime next year? early october? If you agree
2	then its probably a good idea then!
3	
4	M

**4.3.3 Analysis of Chloe's email**

**4.3.3.1 Chloe's speech act analysis**

In summary, Chloe asked Matthew about what he had decided to do for his proposal and Matthew gave a brief answer. Following Matthew's answer, Chloe then responded to Matthew's plan in some comments. It appeared that Chloe's comments were twofold: following the thread of Matthew's discussion and making evaluations. First, in order to follow Matthew's previous email, Chloe began with a question. At first glance, the question (Are you serious?) was not clear, for she did not state what Matthew was serious about. Yet, in the context, it was not difficult to see that Chloe meant to ask if Matthew was serious about proposing in a hot air balloon.

In addition to the question's literal meaning, I suggest that the question mainly worked as a reminder of what had been discussed in their previous emails. This inference was drawn from what followed after her question. Before Matthew had a chance to say whether he was serious about the hot air balloon idea, Chloe had expressed her views on it. It can be inferred that Chloe's question did not intend to inquire about the seriousness of Matthew's idea but to show interest in the topic which Matthew had introduced. Following this line of thought, I would argue that instead of seeing the question as a directive act for requesting answers, it would make

more sense to see it as the opening line of what she wished to express later.

Following the enquiry, Chloe gave positive feedback by using the adjective ‘interesting’. She further supported her comment by explaining why she thought the idea was interesting (see lines 2 & 3 in email E). Her feedback was realised by the use of an expressive act, which aimed to present her opinions. The expressive act in Chloe’s email was carried out by imitating face-to-face conversation and stating her views.

a. Imitating face-to-face conversation

Before Chloe’s actual comments, a lexical filler (hmm) was used along with trailing dots. The trailing dots in this context seemed to mimic a pause in speech in face-to-face conversation. Suler (1998) suggests that the effect of trailing dots in emails could “lead the person into or psychologically prepare them for your next idea.” Similarly, I supposed that the trailing dots in Chloe’s email were meant to imitate the action of taking a moment to ponder over the hot air balloon idea before leading into her actual judgment of it.

b. Stating her views

Chloe used three adjectives (interesting, special, private) to describe the hot air balloon proposal. Following the evaluations of the plan, Chloe in her concluding remark wrote, “I can feel the romance now.” Seen from the context, it appeared that Chloe’s positive comments on the plan were reasons to support her feeling that it was romantic. The stated reasons had made her feelings seemed more sincere. In short, the evaluation of the plan and the actual statement of Chloe’s personal feeling worked together to express a candid opinion.

In what follows, I further explore how Chloe renegotiated her face and, at the

same time, maintained her polite email correspondence with Matthew.

#### **4.3.3.2 Chloe's (im)politeness analysis**

As mentioned in Chloe's e-interview, she deliberately shortened her email content because she did not wish to write too much when Matthew was replying in few words. She commented in her e-interview that "It was usually me that wrote a lot but got short reply. I guessed that he was not so interested in our email exchange." Her e-interview supports the inference that Matthew's short responses were interpreted by Chloe as a signal of a lack of interest in their email correspondence. In this sense, Matthew's short messages had threatened Chloe's positive face. To save her own face, Chloe chose to cut the length of her emails. Crystal (2001) suggests that email style may change to suit different communicative needs. In line with Crystal's argument, I suggest that Chloe's alteration of the length of her emails may have been due to her dissatisfaction with Matthew's short responses.

In this section, I investigate and explain how Chloe preserved her own face without disrupting her email correspondence with Matthew. In what follows, I want to show how interpersonal relationship was renegotiated through the changes of greetings/vocatives and vernacular writing style in Chloe's emails.

##### **a. Vocatives**

It was observed that in the first few weeks of their email correspondences, they usually began their emails with a greeting (Hi) and the name of the addressee (Matthew/Chloe). Gradually, from week 5, the endearment was added before the vocatives by both participants (i.e. Dear Matthew). However, Chloe stopped using the endearment when the dramatic change in the length of their emails ensued in week 11.

In Chloe's email C, no vocative was used and in email E the short form of Matthew's name – Matt – was used. It was surmised that the two changes in the use of vocatives could be a sign of the change in Chloe's attitude toward Matthew, which had become less polite and more casual, like Matthew's emails.

In week 12, Chloe expressed her views on email politeness in her e-journal and stated, "I think a polite email must contain proper title, careful selection of words, especially the way of stating ideas should be euphemistic. Also the length of an email is important too--it shouldn't be too short, or it will seem a bit casual" (Chloe's week 12 e-journal). According to Chloe's e-journal, Matthew's emails would not have seemed to meet Chloe's views on email politeness. Matthew's short emails were interpreted by Chloe as signifying a loss of interest. The interpretation of Matthew's attitude could be face-threatening to Chloe. In order to save her own face, Chloe dropped the vocatives and greetings to show her counter-indifference.

#### b. Vernacular writing style

Another noticeable change in Chloe's emails was the vernacular writing style. As discussed in Chloe's speech act analysis, some colloquial elements were added in her email to simulate face-to-face conversation. For example, "hmm ..." was used to signal a pause. What followed after the pause was a comment without a subject (sounds interesting!). The changes seemed to reveal her reactions to Matthew's emails. Chloe comments on her own change of writing style in her e-journal, "when i found that my e-pal did not respond as politely as I had done to him, i started to respond more casually too" (week 12 e-journal).

Even though the changes in Chloe's email were manifest, Chloe did not intend to disrupt her email correspondence with Matthew. Both the changes of greetings/vocatives and writing style could be seen as an attempt on her part to renegotiate her role in the email interactions with him. In other words, I argued that the change in Chloe's response was a production of what Locher calls 'relational work' (see Chapter 2). In relational work, polite or impolite meanings are constructed discursively. Goffman also points out that face is "diffusely located in the flow of events" (Goffman, 1967:7). Chloe's interpretation of Matthew's insouciant attitude may have threatened her face. Thus, Chloe may have made the changes in her emails in an attempt to renegotiate her face and show that she also was not serious and devoted to their email interactions. Locher and Watts (2005) suggest that any verbal production is significant in defining relationships. Given Locher and Watts' arguments, Matthew's verbal production had an impact on Chloe. As a consequence, Chloe's changes also influenced her relationship with Matthew.

In the next section, I look at Matthew's reply and discuss the correlations between Matthew and Chloe's emails.

#### **4.3.4 Analysis of Matthew's email**

##### **4.3.4.1 Matthew's speech act analysis**

In response to Chloe's email E, Matthew made another short reply. His reply consisted of two parts. The first part was to answer the questions raised in Chloe's email regarding the time of the proposal. Question marks were used in his answer to indicate uncertainty. The second part of the email aimed to make a comment on Chloe's judgment of the proposal plan. I focus mainly on the second part of his email where the specific features of politeness intentions were conveyed. The politeness



implicatures will be further discussed in the next section.

Syntactically, Matthew's comment was formed using a 'conditional clause' ('If you agree then its probably a good idea then!'). Conditional sentences contain a main clause and a subordinate ('conditional') clause. The main clause is sustained when the condition of the subordinate clause is met. In this case, the main clause was 'its probably a good idea then' whereas the subordinate clause was 'if you agree'. Thus, semantically, Matthew expressed the view that his proposal plan could work, if Chloe also agreed that it was a good plan.

It can be noted that 'then' was used twice in this sentence. The first one was used directly after the subordinate clause and the second one was used at the end of the sentence. I suggest that they functioned differently in this context. It was my interpretation that the first 'then' had a similar function to the conditional clause. 'Then' was used to indicate that what followed after the condition (if you agree) was the result (its probably a good idea). The second 'then' was used at the end of the sentence as a colloquial ending word. This interpretation was derived from the informal writing features exhibited throughout Matthew's email, i.e., vernacular words ('yeah' for 'yes'), fragments of sentences (sometime next year? early october?), lower case letters (october) and initials for the signature ("M" for "Matthew"). It was not difficult to see that the above colloquial linguistic display does not meet grammatical accuracy. However, as Baron points out, "Email is more a moving linguistic target than a stable system, thereby complicating the problem of constructing a unified grammar of email" (Baron, 1998:144). That is to say, the language used in email does not have fixed meanings and email language can vary its usage with different writers. Baron's argument points out the fluidity in email. In line with Baron, I argue that since all communications in email are carried out at least

partly in words, all linguistic performances or even non-linguistic performances (i.e., email length) carry communicative meanings. I hold that the investigation of a sentence's lexical choices and syntactic structure must be used as a lead-in to the understanding of its meaning. The investigation of non-standard linguistic display in a sentence can further explain some embedded meanings. On the basis of this belief, Matthew's non-standard linguistic choices contribute to his email style.

In the next section, I show that, beyond Matthew's casual writing style, some politeness implicatures and the presentation of self were still conveyed in his email.

#### **4.3.4.2 Matthew's (im)politeness analysis**

In this section, I discuss the politeness intentions embedded in Matthew's email. As discussed above, the main communicative goal in it was to respond to Chloe's feedback about his proposal plan. In the above speech act analysis, I argue that Matthew stated that the proposal plan could work, if Chloe thought it was a good plan. Apart from its linguistic meaning, I argued that Matthew might wish to attend to both Chloe's negative face (the want not to be imposed upon) and positive face (the want to be valued). He attended to the two faces with the politeness strategies of hedging opinions and presupposing common ground, respectively.

##### **a. Hedging opinions**

Since this email was in response to Chloe's feedback on Matthew's proposal, he may have wished to show his appreciation of her feedback by giving a reciprocating comment. He stated, 'If you agree then its probably a good idea then!' As discussed in Matthew's speech act analysis, the use of 'then' was considered a colloquial ending word. Brown & Levinson (1987) have suggested that 'then' is used in English as "an

indication that the speaker is drawing a conclusion to a line of reasoning carried out cooperatively with the addressee” (p.115). In this case, Matthew drew a conclusion based on Chloe’s comments. In order to better understand the correlations between Chloe’s comments and Matthew’s conclusion, I turn to Chloe’s email.

In this email, she expressed how she felt about Matthew’s proposal plan. Although Chloe sounded positive about it, she did not explicitly state her support of the plan (see email E). Thus, in order to avoid making a wrong assumption about Chloe’s opinion, hedging devices could be identified in Matthew’s statement. First, an ‘if’ clause was used in the sentence to stress that the conclusion was valid so long as the condition (‘if you agree’) was met. Heringer (1972) points out that “felicity conditions may be suspended by putting them in ‘if’ clauses” (cited in Brown & Levinson, 1987: 162). Furthermore, an adverb – ‘probably’ – was used in the main clause to modify the ‘noun phrase – ‘a good idea’. The modifier (probably) had softened the tone of Matthew’s conclusion and made it sound less certain. Brown & Levinson (1987) suggest that hedges are used to “make minimal assumptions about H’s wants” (p.146). In accordance with Brown & Levinson’s argument, it was also my view that by using the modifier, Matthew showed that he had left room for Chloe to disagree. By not presupposing her cooperation, Chloe’s negative face was retained.

Apart from saving Chloe’s negative face, I argue that Matthew’s statement could also support another interpretation, which is that it was aimed to attend to Chloe’s positive face want to be valued.

#### b. Presuppose common ground

In week 10, Matthew had consulted Chloe about how and when a woman would consider a man’s proposal. Chloe then gave her personal experience and suggested to

Matthew that he should show his determination along with some *romantic* setting. Later in week 11, Chloe commented on Matthew's hot air balloon plan as a *romantic* plan ('I can feel the romance now'). It could be seen that the element of 'romance' occurred in both her comments and her advice to Matthew. When considering Chloe's advice in week 10, it was reasonable to suggest that Chloe's comment on Matthew's plan in week 11 showed a certain degree of approval. Thus, when Matthew expressed his feeling that the hot air balloon plan could be a good idea, since Chloe seemed to agree, he also showed that he valued Chloe's opinions. Brown & Levinson (1987:129) suggest that the hearer's positive face may be satisfied when the hearer's wants to be liked and admired are fulfilled. Since Chloe had given Matthew some advice before, she may have wished that her opinions would be taken seriously. Acknowledging Chloe's wants, Matthew showed that he valued and relied on Chloe's opinion to make a good plan for his proposal.

The above discussion leads us to think that Matthew may have attempted to satisfy Chloe's positive and negative face. Yet, even though Matthew's linguistic performances in the emails were not discourteous, Chloe was still not pleased about them. This again called my attention to whether the politeness indicators in email are determined only by the writer's linguistic performance. In the next section, I will discuss some values of the virtual world in relation to politeness.

#### **4.3.5 Discussion**

In this analysis, I show that standard linguistic performance was not the only politeness indicator in email communication. The length of the emails and the colloquial written display also appeared to be influential in the email correspondence of this pair.

It was pointed out that Matthew's short email was interpreted by Chloe as a signal of fading interest. As a result, Chloe's face was threatened. In order to save her own face, she shortened the length of her emails and adopted vernacular features (i.e. omission of address terms, trailing dots) to show that she was not particularly serious about the interactions, either. Apart from showing her attitude through the changes she made, Chloe kept up her interactions with Matthew. Chloe's changes, however, did not seem to affect Matthew. Matthew still maintained his casual and succinct writing style. However, in his short response, he attempted to show that he trusted and valued Chloe's opinions.

Even though Matthew had tried to boost Chloe's status by suggesting that he trusted her judgment, Chloe did not seem to be flattered. In her next email, she discontinued the discussion on Matthew's proposal and moved on to other topics. It was possible that she was so perturbed by the possible implicatures behind Matthew's short emails that she did not seem to notice Matthew's polite intent.

I argue that the discord between Matthew and Chloe derived from their different perceptions of email politeness. Chloe reflected in her e-journal: "I think the length of the emails, the directness of the language and topics are all factors that affect the further development of good relationships. Since emailing is the only way for us to know each other and express our opinions, whatever we observe in e-pal's response is of course the only way for us to judge if our e-pal is really a possible friend-to-be" (week 12, e-journal). Chloe mentioned the length of emails several times in her e-journals and e-interviews. There was little doubt that she took the length of email as an important indicator of her relationship with her e-pal.

On the contrary, Matthew commented in his e-journal that he did not think the length of email would matter to the development of friendship. He wrote, "If we are

frank and candid, friendships can be developed through trust and disclosure” (week 12 e-journal). According to Matthew’s own reflection, Matthew’s week 11 emails did exemplify trust and disclosure since he relied on Chloe’s opinion on his personal plan to propose. Nevertheless, instead of recognising Matthew’s disclosure as a token of trust, Chloe took more notice of the length of Matthew’s email. Matthew, however, did not seem to notice that his short email had offended Chloe and continued his brief but friendly emails. Their different views regarding what constitutes a polite email could be the reason for the disharmony in their email interactions. It could be inferred that during the email interactions, the interactants would have been able to form a consensus on what would be considered appropriate for their email correspondence, including the length of each email, the frequency of the email correspondence per week and the language used.

But this analysis would not go so far as to suggest that there are absolute rules or conventions for composing emails. It is hoped that this analysis has shown that email should be considered a dynamic modality shaped and used in accordance with different communicative needs. Baron suggests that “[w]hat remains to be seen is whether distinct email conventions will disappear in the face of existing spoken and written norms or whether traditional speech and writing will incorporate some of the current characteristics of contemporary email” (Baron, 2000:259). She rightly points out the fluidity in email. In conclusion, the appropriateness in email is still in flux. The rules of appropriateness may become more comprehensible when they are understood as mutual negotiation and agreement between the interactants. Thus, discursive understanding of email politeness is a prerequisite.

#### **4.4 Pair 3 –Interview Advice**

##### **4.4.1 Participants' profiles**

###### Andy

Andy, a 45-year-old British man, was an operations manager in the shoe business. He was the representative of Adidas and Reebok in Indonesia. Before he moved to Indonesia, he had lived in China for nearly 4 years, where he learned Mandarin for 3½ years. He has spent 20 years travelling and working in Korea (5.5 years), China (4 years) and finally Indonesia (9.5 years) where he met his wife. Andy uses English, Indonesian and Mandarin in his regular email correspondence.

###### Sherry

Sherry, a 22-year-old Taiwanese, was a university student in her senior year. At the time she joined this project, Sherry had just finished her exchange student programme in New Zealand. She felt that her views on cultures had broadened after this visit. By joining the project, she wished to practise her English and at the same time learn about her e-pal's cultural values. Sherry used both Chinese and English in her regular email correspondence.

##### **4.4.2 Communicative event**

Andy and Sherry tried to email each other in Chinese, Andy learned his Chinese in China, where people use simplified Chinese writing. In the first stage of their email correspondence, he tried to write his greetings in simplified Chinese but Sherry could not read his Chinese words. This was because China's simplified Chinese writing is not used by people in Taiwan, who use traditional Chinese writing and sometime Taiwan's computer system cannot correctly decode the simplified Chinese words; this

may be what had happened to Andy's Chinese writing; his simplified Chinese was too much for Sherry's computer. Because of this, they came to depend on the use of English in their email correspondence.

Yet it was interesting to note that the two distinct systems of Chinese writing were not the only noticeable feature of Andy and Sherry's language differences. Conventional and unconventional ways of English spelling were also prominent. As can be seen in this email set, Sherry wrote her emails using non-standard English spelling and Andy replied in standard English. This difference in their language use seemed to become significant in the development of their relationship, as discussed further below. Before going into an analysis, I describe the communicative event of this pair.

In Sherry's email, she described the process of an interview and expressed her feelings toward interviews. At the end of her email, she asked Andy for some interview advice. In reply to Sherry's email Andy briefly responded with some suggestions. Although Andy indicated that he would write more about this topic later at the end of his email, he did not do so in the end. He did not appear to be interested in sharing his experience with Sherry. In the following analysis, taking into consideration the linguistic choices of the two participants and the registers, I discuss the interplay of language and power between this pair.



#### Extract G. Week 3 Sherry to Andy

1	Hi Andy:
2	I just got back. A freaking exhausting day. I spent almost ten hours on traffic
3	for da return trip from Tainan t Taipei. I had an interview for an educational
4	fair of studying abroad. The job requires me t help and translate in da fair. Bt
5	this interviewer asks us t talk anything we want for two minutes in English.
6	Personally, I dun quite like interview. First, I have da stage fright. I feel
7	nervous when others' eyes on me, especially when I need t speak in Eng.
8	Second, I am not a good speaker. I tend t talk whatever that comes into my
9	mind. I miss da important points. Besides, I just dunno what kind of people
10	they'd like to hire in this educational fair. Do u have any interview
11	experience?Or r u da one who gives interviews? Probably u might share some
12	tips with me. Haha.
13	
14	Sherry

#### Extract H. Week 4 Andy to Sherry

1	Hi Sherry - yes I have had interviews and given them too. I would be happy to
2	give some advice.
3	ThE first one is to smile be clean and neat and look interested. Be ready to talk
4	and offer info. Try not to be nervous.
5	...more to come...
6	
7	Andy

### **4.4.3 Sherry's analysis**

#### **4.4.3.1 Sherry's speech act analysis**

As summarised above, since Sherry just came back from an interview, she asked Andy for some interview tips. In what follows, I look at the syntactic structure and semantic meaning of Sherry's question. These investigations are important because the understanding of the question's pragmatic functions can help to support whether Sherry's email should be judged polite or impolite.

Sherry posed two questions: 'Do u have any interview experience? Or r u da one who gives interviews?' In performing the linguistic analysis, I discuss Sherry's question in terms of its pragmatic functions and informality of writing style.

a. Pragmatic functions

In lines 11 & 12, Sherry asked, 'Do u have any interview experience? Or r u da one who gives interviews?' Austin and Searle both suggest that every speech act has both locutionary meaning and illocutionary force (Austin,1962 ; Searle,1969). As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature review, a locutionary act is an act of saying something whereas an illocutionary act is an act performed in saying something. Sometimes the real intended force of a speech may be different from the meaning conveyed in the syntactic form of a sentence. Thus, in order to more accurately distinguish the locutionary from the illocutionary meaning of Sherry's questions, it is necessary to consider the context which the questions were raised.

Sherry's questions, at first glance, appeared to be an enquiry about Andy's past experience of interviews. Both of Sherry's questions were Yes/No questions. On the surface, the purpose of the questions was to request information. However, it was doubtful if Sherry intended her questions to be answered with a simple yes or no. Before posing the questions, Sherry had spent her whole email describing her interview experience. Thus, it was more likely that Sherry's questions meant to engage Andy on this topic. This inference can be further confirmed with the sentence following the questions. Sherry stated, "'Probably u might share some tips with me. Haha.' The semantic meaning of the sentence was to ask for advice. It was an indirect request as the adverb "probably" was used in the sentence to give the request a sense of ambiguity, which then freed Andy from feeling obliged to give advice. The written out laughter- 'Haha' (line12) at the end of the sentence could be seen as a modifier to alleviate the potential imposition entailed in her invitation to this 'interview' discussion.

Judging from the way in which Sherry created a propitious situation for Andy to

easily join the conversation, the preceding questions could then be considered as an initiation of discussion on this topic (interviews). In this sense, it was less likely that Sherry's questions were intended to elicit a simple Yes/No reply. Rather, the questions, when seen in the context, were intended to invite more conversation from her e-pal and also to create an opportunity to enhance their relationship by exchanging personal experiences.

#### b. Informality of writing style

In addition to the above interpretation of Sherry's questions as a way of inviting interactions from her e-pal, the informality of Sherry's writing may also have revealed her intention of making the email correspondence more resemble some online chat system or SMS (short message service).

The informality of her writing could be seen from the non-standard spelling of English throughout the email. In this particular email, 18 non-standard spelling words were used. Sherry used non-standard spelling from the outset of her email correspondence with Andy. Words such as 'the' was replaced with 'da', 'to' with 't' and 'you' with 'u'. Hine (2001) suggests that most non-standard spelling features in English emails are deliberate choices made by users to : 1) economize on typing effort; 2) mimic spoken language features or 3) Express themselves creatively. Sherry's email seemed to bear out these three points. First of all, her non-standard spelling is always shorter than the traditional English spelling, i.e. dunno for 'don't know'. Second, Sherry tended to write in a more colloquial way: 'A freaking exhausting day' (line 2). The use of colloquial verbalizations and non-standard spellings are reminiscent of some instant messaging services. Sherry, reflecting in her e-interview, wrote, "I first started with simplified spelling after one year in NZ where I picked up

this habit when chatting on msn or texting with cell phone with people. I think it quite efficient and faster in typing words” (e-interview). Judging from this, it was possible that Sherry intended to make her email seem more informal, like an online chatting system. This sense of informality was created by using non-standard spelling and colloquial words. The exhibition of chatting features in Sherry’s email made it clear that Sherry intended her email to be the start of their dialogue in this topic.

This discussion has been about the way in which questions and the unconventional linguistic choices were used in the context to create a casual milieu for conversations. In what follows, I will explore how questions were used as politeness strategy.

#### **4.4.3.2 Sherry’s (im)politeness analysis**

As discussed above, the request for interview tips was actually a way to invite Andy into the conversation. Before making the request, Sherry adopted a politeness strategy: ‘self-deprecation’. Self-deprecation is usually considered a positive politeness strategy which aims to protect the speaker’s positive face needs (e.g. ‘I could have done the work an hour ago if I had been smart enough’). This self-deprecatory humour could then save the speaker’s own face (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1998). However, the self-deprecation which aims to support the hearer’s face needs was not much discussed. In this analysis, I will show how Sherry’s self-deprecation was used as a strategy to give higher status to Andy.

As shown in this analysis, Sherry attempted to boost her e-pal’s face. I argue that Sherry stated her weaknesses overtly in order to attain her politeness purpose, which was to grant higher status to her e-pal. Hence, the goal of Sherry’s self-deprecation was to support her e-pal’s face.

Leech states, “[i]n order to be polite, *S* expresses or implies meanings which place a high value on what pertains to *O* (*O*= other person[s], [mainly the addressee]) or place a low value on what pertains to *S* (*S* = self, speaker) (2005:12)”. Leech’s statement of politeness provides explanations for Sherry’s move of self-deprecation. Based on Leech’s conceptualization of politeness, Sherry’s denigration of self could be a strategy of showing modesty. Goffman (1967/1999) has proposed that, by showing modesty, the speaker anticipates praise from other persons. In return, the hearer should accordingly acknowledge the speaker’s polite intention and give the speaker credit. In line with Goffman’s argument, it was also my interpretation that Sherry may have shown her incompetent interview skills in order to invite Andy’s supportive feedback. Furthermore, by asking Andy for some interview tips, Sherry had indirectly granted Andy higher status by putting him in a position of offering advice. In this sense, her self-deprecation seemed to support Andy’s positive face, which is the want to be valued by others.

This suggests that not only did Sherry’s questions intend to engage Andy in the conversation, but also made strategic use of questions to boost Andy’s status. The investigation of Sherry’s questions feeds into the analysis of Andy’s email. After discussing the pragmatic implicatures carried in Sherry’s questions, I turn next at Andy’s reply.

#### **4.4.4 Analysis Andy’s email**

##### **4.4.4.1 Andy’s speech act analysis**

In response to Sherry’s invitation to give her some suggestions Andy’s reply was succinct. His reply only targeted answering Sherry’s questions. The response consisted of two speech acts: commissive and directive speech acts. In order to better

understand Andy's response, the speech acts he performed in his email will be discussed in relation to Sherry's questions

a. Commissive speech act

Andy stated in his email, "I would be happy to give some advice" (lines 1 -2). This sentence appeared to be an agreement to give advice because it was a response to Sherry's request for interview tips. Sherry stated, "Probably u might share some tips with me." As discussed earlier, the adverb "probably" was used in the sentence to modify the request and create space for Andy to either refuse or accept Sherry's request. Since Andy stated that he would be happy to give advice, presumably it meant that Sherry's request for suggestions was accepted by Andy. In Searle's taxonomy, the act of commitment to a future act is categorised as a commissive speech act (Searle, 1969). In offering to give advice Andy had committed himself to the task of providing suggestions, which are discussed in the next point.

b. Directive speech acts

With regard to the interview tips Andy listed a few suggestions (lines 4 &5). They appeared to be an act of giving advice. Based on Searle's (1976) taxonomy, advice-giving is considered as speech act of directives. Yet, unlike the most commonly used directive – request – the imposition entailed in giving advice upon the hearer of the request is not heavy. This because the advice is usually given mainly in the interests of the hearer of the request (see Tsui, 1994; Mandala 1999). Although the act of giving advice and making a request are both categorised as directives, they are intrinsically different, in terms of the speaker's intention. I argue that in order to tell the difference between a request and a piece of advice, one should begin with the

speaker's communicative goal. In Andy's case, the list of suggestions was written in response to Sherry's request for interview tips. In line 4 ('The first one is to smile be clean and neat and look interested'), the pronoun "one" was used. Since the sentence would not make sense without knowing what the pronoun was referring to, it was necessary to go back to the previous sentence to see what the pronoun was used as a substitute for. In this case, the sentence immediately before was the commissive statement, in which Andy offered to give some advice. Thus, the pronoun was used to refer to giving advice. The combined use of an ordinal number with a pronoun was meant to signify the beginning of the list of interview tips. Following this trend of thought, Andy's speech should be considered a speech act of giving advice.

Hinkel (1997), in her cross-cultural study of Chinese and American people's production of advice acts, classifies the speech act of giving advice as indirect (give hints), hedged (i.e. maybe) or direct (be careful) advice acts. Andy's advice was stated directly and without any mitigation devices. Andy gave seven tips. They were 1) smile, 2) be clean and 3) neat, 4) look interested, 5) be ready to talk and 6) offer information, 7) try not to be nervous. The advice appeared to be in the imperative mood since no subject was indicated in the sentences. It was omitted because it was apparent to whom the advice was addressed. Siemund (2007) suggests that "in most studies, the label 'imperative' is reserved for sentence types expressing such speech acts when they are directed to addressees in the narrow sense of the word (second person)" (p.21). Using similar reasoning, the imperative in Andy's email was targeted at advising Sherry of some interview tips.

In the following section, I will discuss the (im)politeness meanings embedded in Andy's advice, with relation to his exercise of power.

#### 4.4.4.2 Andy's (im)politeness analysis

Some researchers have established that advice-giving is an intrinsically face-threatening act since the nature of advice itself often casts doubts on the advisee's competence and grants superiority to the advice giver (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Tsui, 1994; Hinkel, 1997). Thus, Hinkel (1997) suggests that "all advice must be hedged and never given explicitly to avoid offending the hearer ... the speaker is presupposed to have the right or the authority to give advice" (p.5). However, Andy's advice appeared to be stated explicitly without any hedging devices. Furthermore, he did not show support or make comments on Sherry's self-deprecatory account of her interview experience. Pomerantz (1984) proposes that a preferred response for a self-deprecation is disagreement. Agreement with a self-deprecation is radically face-threatening. In Andy's case, even though he did not literally state that he agreed with Sherry's self-deprecation, his 'no comment' could entail similar connotation. Consequently, without giving supportive feedback Andy may indirectly have threatened Sherry's positive face.

In this email Andy devoted his attention solely to advice-giving, which incidentally revealed the power relations between Andy and Sherry. Saville-Troike states, "power is not only displayed through language; it is often achieved through language" (Saville-Troike, 2003:260). Andy's demonstration of his power status could be inferred from two aspects of Andy's language display: the imperative tone and the conventional writing style.

##### a. Imperative tone

When Sherry asked Andy for some interview tips, she had incidentally raised Andy's status as an adviser and lowered her own status as an inexperienced



interviewee. In answering Sherry's request and performing the speech act of giving advice, Andy had also accepted his higher position in this conversation. The hierarchical status of Andy and Sherry in this particular topic was initiated. Saville-Troike proposes that "power is realized or co-constructed in such forms because some people have more control than others over the production of discourse and the differential (and deferential) language forms help create and enact differential (and deferential) social status in the processes of communication" ( Saville-Troike, 2003:256).

Andy further demonstrated his higher position by asserting his advice in imperative format. As opposed to Sherry's use of a hedging word (i.e. probably) or written-out laughter (i.e. haha), the language used in Andy's email was more assertive. I interpreted it as indicating that the language use in Andy's email had close connections with his background. Andy's pre-survey questionnaire had stated that he was a 45-year-old operations manager for Adidas and Reebok, which are both well-known sportswear brands. It could be assumed that Andy's interview experience was substantial. Andy may have stated his advice in imperative tone in order to show his professionalism and confidence at work. As suggested by Saville-Troike, the use of hedges could be a sign of "lack of power or control" (p.257). For perhaps a similar reason, Andy did not apply hedges to modify his tone when giving advice. Instead he used imperative tone, signifying his managerial status.

#### b. Conventional writing style

The most obvious difference between Andy and Sherry's emails was their English writing style. As mentioned in Sherry's speech act analysis, non-standard spelling was used in her email to create a colloquial style. Andy's English writing,

unlike Sherry, followed the conventions of English spelling. Throughout Andy's email, he always spelled out the English words in full. Gains suggests that standard English is more likely to be used in business-related email and personal email tends to be more casual, with such features as emoticons, acronyms and spelling or grammatical errors (Gains, 1999). On this basis, Sherry's email was more casual whereas Andy appeared to be more formal, like a business email.

This distinct difference accords with the above analysis. On the one hand, Sherry intended to bring the features of chatting into her emails; on the other, Andy remained more conventional in his writing. Both Andy and Sherry seemed to be aware of the discernible difference in their writing styles. Andy acknowledged in his e-interview that he was not quite used to the non-standard spelling writing style. He wrote, "I felt a little uncomfortable. I think there is a bit of a generation gap and the simplifications are sometimes not immediately clear to me. Why anyone would use "da" instead of "the" I have no idea (because it saves 1 letter?)" (Andy's e-interview). Based on Andy's interview comment, it could be seen that he did not approve of the non-standard spelling writing style and may have been disturbed by the eccentric spelling of words in Sherry's emails. In consequence of the incongruous writing styles between Andy and Sherry, Andy lost his enthusiasm for reading and writing to Sherry.

Sherry ascribed Andy's reserved attitude to her non-standard writing. She wrote in her e-interview, "during correspondence, I didn't find Andy using these simplified words. So I gradually stopped using this spelling" (Sherry's e-interview). She started to change most of her words into conventional spellings. For example, the changes, such as 'da' to 'the' and 'bt' to 'but', could be identified in Sherry's week 12 email. This change had brought positive feedback from Andy. When Andy was asked how he felt about the change in Sherry's writing, he wrote, "I thought it was positive because

I could immediately understand the meaning of the sentences” (Andy’s e-interview). From their reflections, it could be seen that Andy had received more deference from Sherry when she changed her writing style for him. Andy, on the contrary, continued to use standard spelling in his writing from first to last.

In short, the use of language in Andy’s email manifested his power status in the interactions. Furthermore, based on the above analysis, it was not difficult to see that the importance for Andy to assert power status had outstripped Sherry’s face needs.

#### **4.4.5 Discussion**

In the above analysis, I have tackled three main issues which emerged in this pair’s email correspondence. First, Sherry’s politeness strategy – ‘self-deprecation’ – was discussed in relation to her cultural background as well as her politic intention to invite further conversation from Andy.

Second, the unconventional English spelling in Sherry’s email was discussed. The non-standard spelling was used in Sherry’s email in order to create a sense of relaxation and a colloquial atmosphere; nevertheless, it became a barrier between Andy and Sherry since he did not appreciate this form of writing. Last but not least, I came to the discussion of the power relations between Sherry and Andy through the language use in their emails. It was concluded that the language display in Andy’s email aimed to reveal his social status as an experienced manager and his superiority over Sherry on this particular point.

The aforementioned differences eventually estranged Andy and Sherry. Sherry commented in her e-journal, “We don’t seem t find a topic that we are both interested. Sometimes, I said sth, but my e-pal doesn’t give the response that I’d expected” (Sherry’s week 5 e-journal). It could be seen from Sherry’s reflection that even

though both Andy and Sherry used English, they still seemed to communicate in different languages. The difficulty in their communication can also be observed from the total number of their email correspondences. Although they maintained their email correspondence until the end of the project, the frequency of their emails greatly declined from 8 emails (total number of emails in week 1) to 3 emails (total number of emails in week 12). Also the average length of their emails was reduced from 2366 words (total number of the word count in week 1) to 278 words (total number of the word count in week 12). Even though there could be numerous reasons which brought their email correspondence to its ebb, my observations of their email correspondence of the 12 weeks suggests that the use of different writing style, which points to different social attitudes and connections, may have caused the gulf between Andy and Sherry.

As discussed in the above analysis, the use of non-standard spelling was salient in Sherry's emails. Herring (2001) points out that for all the non-standard features, "only a relatively small percentage of such features appears to be errors caused by inattention or lack of knowledge of the standard language forms"(p.616). In short, the non-standard features appeared in emails are mostly self-conscious decisions. In line with Herring's view, Sherry's non-standard spelling could be considered as a meaningful message, which she used playfully to achieve a more informal effect and eventually add to her idiosyncrasy. Crystal (2001) states, "E-mail has extended the language's stylistic range in interesting and motivating ways" (p.128). However, Andy seemed to be disapprove of this type of writing. The significant difference in their writing style could be conveyed by both Andy and Sherry as a sign of obvious different social experience and standards.

Since they could not create common ground between themselves, they seem to

encounter some difficulty in developing their interpersonal relationship. Tannen (1982) proposes that “ [i]t is sharing of conversational strategies that creates the feeling of satisfaction which accompanies and follows successful conversation: the sense of being understood, being ‘on the same wave length’, belonging and therefore of sharing identity. Conversely, a lack of congruity in conversational strategies creates the opposite feeling: of dissonance, not being understood, not belonging and therefore of not sharing identity” (Tannen, 1982: 217). With a similar viewpoint, Brown & Levinson also suggest that ‘in-group language’ is a positive politeness strategy by which interactants show that they share similar attitudes. Agreeing with their arguments, it is also my view that the major problem between Andy and Sherry is likely to have been the lack of common ground in terms of linguistic and communicative strategies. Andy was 23 years older than Sherry. Sherry’s non-standard spelling was considered a sign of ‘youth language’ by Andy. Andy commented in his e-interview that, “Someone should write an English>SMS hua (Chinese pinyin for ‘language’) dictionary for us old guys : -) “ (the explanation in the bracket is mine). This reflection makes it reasonable to suggest that Andy and Sherry’s writing styles were not only dissimilar, but they also signified different social perspectives. It may have led both participants to be keenly aware of their ‘generation gap’, which could then become the barrier between them.

It is not my intention to suggest that the difference in their writing style was the only cause of their remaining at a distance. However, this was the most apparent factor which influenced the development of their relationship. As a final remark, I would draw attention to the prevailing use of non-standard spelling in electronic forms of communication. Baron points out that “email is clearly a language in flux” (Baron, 252). There is no absoluteness in the use of language in email. I believe that

this new form of linguistic use should be further explored in terms of its electronic pragmatics.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter, three communicative events were analysed. Based on the discursive analysis of face negotiations and the (im)politeness strategies employed to achieve their communicative goals, three main conclusions could be drawn.

Firstly, in pair 1, rhetorical questions were used to attack the other person's face. The function of question in this instance is contrary to what Brown & Levinson suggest in their politeness strategies, where questions are used as a hedging device to modify tones. Thus, some strategies which they consider polite may in fact carry face-threatening meanings. It seems safe to suggest that the (im)politeness meaning should be seen in relation to its context.

The second point is with regard to the appropriacy of email length. In pair 2, the interactants' perceptions of what is the appropriate length of email were different. The one who wrote short email was interpreted by the other person as signal for disinterest in the interactions. Based on this analysis, the rules of appropriateness between the interactants could be essential to the development of rapport.

Finally, Sherry, in pair 3, was keen on using the non-standard spelling to construct idiosyncrasy and create a sense of informal atmosphere. However, her epal (Andy) prefer to use standardised writing style to reveal his senior social status and experience. The significant difference displayed their writing style could be conveyed by both Andy and Sherry as they belonged to different group of people. Thus, it could be seen that in computer-mediated discourse, the style of writing (i.e. non-standard spelling) is also considered as an indicator for interpersonal meaning.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Data analysis II**

#### **5.1 Introduction:**

In this chapter, three analyses ensue in 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4. The participants in the three data sets all showed greater concern for their epals' faces than for their own. In 5.2, the interactants negotiated different viewpoints regarding dieting without arousing unpleasant feelings by their disagreement. In 5.3, the communicative event was the girls' talk on the issue of relationships. During the interactions, solidarity was formed through their expressing similar views. Finally, in 5.4, the participant worried so much that her question might have offended her epal that she apologised first for her unawareness of any possible offence that her question might have caused.

#### **5.2 Pair 4 - Dieting**

##### **5.2.1 Participants' profiles**

###### Eve

Eve was a 20-year-old British-born Chinese young woman studying at Loughborough University. Her mother was originally a Vietnamese-born Chinese and her father was originally from Hong Kong. Thus Eve could speak Cantonese, Vietnamese and Hakka. She had been learning Mandarin for 3 years but was not fluent in it, as she did not have many opportunities to use the language.

###### May

May was a 20-year-old Taiwanese young woman who majored in English at the National Taiwan Normal University. Hitherto, she had never had a friend from another country. Thus she was looking forward to learning more about foreign culture and

customs. Although her major was in English, she still felt that she lacked opportunities to use the language. By joining this project, she wished to increase her chance to use English.

### 5.2.2 Communicative event

As university students of the same age, Eve and May were curious about what girls of their age from different countries thought and did. Thus, there were many life experience exchanges in their emails. The particular event analysed in this section developed from the discussion of food. May mentioned that she needed to think twice when she wanted to drink ‘milk tea’ (a popular sweet beverage in Taiwan) because she was on a diet. Eve seemed to disapprove of dieting. In May’s reply, she explained that many Asian girls were on a diet because of the traditional regard for thinness as beauty. But she also provided an example which accorded with Eve’s view on dieting.

#### Extract I. Week 4 Eve to May

3	You are on a diet! Why is it that many girls living in Asia are on a diet?
4	All the girls I know living in China, HK, Thailand etc. always worry about
5	their weight. Sometimes I feel pressure too because my mum watches many
6	HK tv shows (where the actress is very thin) but still diet is not good for
7	your health.

#### Extract J. Week4 May to Eve

2	Many girls in my country are on a diet. Maybe we are all influenced by mass
3	media. When I watch TV and read magazines, most of the models and
4	leading characters are all thin. Besides, in Chinese tradition, we think
5	thinness means beauty. Therefore, many girls living in Asia always feel they
6	are too heavy
	***
12	For me, although I am on a diet, I always keep an eye on my health. I would
	strike a balance between diet and nutrition.

(\*\*\* intervening sentences are omitted)



### 5.2.3 Analysis of Eve's email

#### 5.2.3.1 Eve's speech act analysis

Researchers have suggested that speech acts should be understood relationally. It is suggested that the successful carrying out of a speech act is logically dependent on the content of an antecedent utterance (see Mann & Thompson, 1987; Asher, 1993). This finding is important in this analysis. I also believe that the meaning and function of a speech act can be better understood when they are examined in the context where the speech act takes place. Thus, in order to be consistent in taking contextual factors into consideration throughout the data analysis, the investigation of a speech act will not only take Austin and Searle's speech act taxonomies as basic guidelines, but also consider the intended function of each speech act in its context.

As shown in the abstract, the communicative goal of Eve's email was to express her views about dieting. She questioned why dieting was so prevalent in Asian countries. Eve's opening statement regarding the topic of dieting was a statement which finished with an exclamation mark. Following the statement, Eve posed a question and then described her and her friends' experience of dieting. It is interpreted that the question was posed to indicate her doubts and to seek explanations from May.

Why is it that many girls living in Asia are on a diet?
---

(Line 3)

As shown in line 3, the question formula was formed by using a WH question. Searle classifies questions as directives, because they denote a request for information; he points out that there are two main types of question: complete propositions (i.e. questions which can be answered by simple a Yes/ No) and incomplete propositions (i.e. WH questions which require more elaborated answers). Searle's taxonomy is based on the syntactic forms of the sentence. However, Asher & Lascarides argue that

although the understanding of the form of the sentence is important, it cannot be “the primary basis for distinguishing various speech act types” (Asher & Lascarides, 1993:188). They propose to investigate speech acts in their rhetorical function, which means looking at the content and finding the relationships in context. Agreeing with Asher & Lascarides’ proposition, I look at the directive speech act (question) from its antecedent ‘You are on a diet!’. The antecedent ended with an exclamation mark. The exclamation mark, as defined in Cambridge dictionary, is a punctuation mark used to indicate strong feeling or high volume. In this case, the exclamatory statement was a repetition of one in May’s previous email, where she stated, ‘I’m on a diet’. The repeated statement was a prompt for Eve’s subsequent interrogative sentence, where she questioned the reason for Asian girls’ obsession with dieting. Eve’s question, though meant to be an inquiry, also revealed her impression of the diet phenomenon in Asian societies. To exemplify the assumption (dieting is popular in Asian countries) carried in her question, Eve cited her Asian friends who worried about their weight. By providing examples of people being concerned about weight and her inability to understand the reason for having to diet, it can be inferred that Eve is actually opposed to dieting. Though not explicitly stated in words, her attitude was still implicit. She finished her discussion with a declaration, ‘diet is not good for your health’ (lines 6-7).

Investigation of the context reveals that the question functions not only as an interrogation, but also as a sign of the speaker’s position on the topic. Searle holds that, in performing one utterance act, one can perform two illocutionary acts. One of the illocutions will be literal and the other indirect. In this case, the literal meaning is a request to have explained the prevailing phenomenon of dieting in Asian countries. Another indirect meaning is to display her negative opinion of dieting. This inferred

meaning of Eve's attitude toward the topic was confirmed in Eve's weekly journal. She stated that, "Although I do not agree with it, I understand the pressure of dieting." (Eve's week 4 e-journal)

### **5.2.3.2 Eve's (im)politeness analysis**

Showing disapproval of her e-pal's diet plan, there was a danger that Eve could have put May's face at risk. However, this interchange of different opinions regarding diet did not seem to pose a threat to their relationship. The politeness implications carried in Eve's writing allowed her to transmit her attitudes in a not too intrusive way. Brown & Levinson suggest in their politeness theory that the intrinsic face threats include disapproval, disagreement, challenge and non-cooperation. These probably conveyed a threat to the relationship between issuer and receiver (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65-66). Indeed, in this email exchange, Eve's disapproval of May's diet plan might have threatened May's face. Yet the disagreement did not seem to disrupt their communication and cause a tension in their interaction. I argue that the degree of sensitivity in the interlocutors to the face threat is negotiated along with the flow of their interaction. Goffman also suggests that 'face maintenance is a condition of interaction, not its objective'' (1967, p. 12). Thus the following discussion of the politeness strategies used in this communicative event will take into consideration the related factors, such as communicative norms, relationship, background and gender. Below the three politeness strategies used in Eve's email are discussed.

#### **a. Using question formula:**

As seen the speech act analysis, the question (line 3) about why people care so much about diet could be understood as a way of indirectly pointing to Eve's different

opinion, since the question showed her disapproval of such dieting. Since Eve has already learned her e-pal's diet plan, showing strong disapproval of her e-pal's diet behaviour may cause offence. Hence, although her attitude could be identified from the way the question was asked, Eve did not over-elaborate on her stance in the passage.

Apart from the indirect function of using the question formula, it is also observable that 'asking questions' had already become a norm of interaction between Eve and May by the time they engaged in this target communicative event. Ever since they found that they were both 20-year-old college students, they had been interested in learning more about what their e-pal did and thought. They frequently asked each other a range of questions, from mild – about school life, music, summer activities – to more private questions concerning families and boyfriends. It had become a communicative norm for them to pose questions in their every email. Eve commented in her e-interview that the use of questions allowed both of them to have equal opportunity to initiate and respond to a topic. She stated, "I think it gives less pressure because it allows more easier flow of communication. Rather than more formal style of emails."

This target communicative event occurred on the 4<sup>th</sup> week when they had already formed the interactive norm of asking questions. Hence, even though the question in this email conveyed Eve's disapproval of May's diet behaviour, it did not appear to be particularly intrusive, since question formulas were already a regular part of their email correspondence. Therefore, it was less likely that May would be too sensitive to questioning or interpret the question as ill-intended.

b. Showing understanding:

After indicating her attitude to dieting, Eve then showed that, despite her disapproval, she could understand the pressure to lose weight. She stated, 'Sometimes I feel pressure too because my mum watches many HK tv shows (where the actress is very thin) ...' (lines 5 & 6). By stating her own experience in facing diet pressure from her mum, Eve showed her empathy for May's decision to diet. Furthermore, before her e-pal responded to her question, Eve provided a reasonable explanation of the diet culture in Asian countries. She suggested that the diet culture was influenced by the media and the thin actresses on television (lines 5-6). Brown & Levinson suggest that by involving oneself with the hearer in the relevant activity, the speaker shows that s/he is a "cooperator". They suggest this strategy "can serve to redress the hearer's positive-face want" (1987:125). Eve's personal example functions not only as a signal of understanding, but also a way of showing her willingness to cooperate with her e-pal's decision, even if it contradicted her own assertion.

c. Showing good will

Although many researchers (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sacks, 1973; Pomerantz, 1984) regard disagreement as a dispreferred action, since it may jeopardize interpersonal relationships, in this case it is not entirely applicable. Pointing out the possible repercussions of dieting, Eve showed that her disapproval derived from concern for May's health. Goffman suggests that face is not necessarily positive, nor is it the same across all situations. This means that face can change from one situation to the next (Goffman, 1967) and that what seems to be a negative comment in one situation (e.g. reporting to a formal meeting a silly mistake which your colleague made could embarrass your colleague) might become a positive

remark in another (e.g. telling a dinner gathering of close friends of the silly mistake your colleague made might actually boost your colleague's face as an entertaining dinner companion). Thus, in this email exchange, although Eve's disapproval of May's diet plan might have posed a threat to Eve's face if the interaction had taken place in a public sphere with other people around, it does not seem to have had the same negative impact because the interchange of ideas actually occurred in a private domain within their email correspondence. In this private email interaction, Eve's oppositional opinion of May's diet plan may in a way support May's want to be cared for. We can see that Eve's intention to show her care for May's health was successfully transmitted, because May's next email says, 'For me, although I am on a diet, I always keep an eye on my health. I would strike a balance between diet and nutrition' (May's email lines 12 &13).

#### **5.2.4 Analysis of May's email**

##### **5.2.4.1 May's speech act analysis**

As discussed above, Eve's communicative goal was to express her disapproval of dieting. This opinion of hers was softened by using hedging device (the use of the question formula) and showing empathy. Furthermore, Eve also implied that she did not support the idea of dieting because she was concerned about May's health. Whether May's intended communicative goal was successfully transmitted should be further analysed in the light of the addressee's reply.

In May's email, the main communicative goal was to provide an explanation for Eve's question ('Why is it that many girls living in Asia are on a diet?'). May explained that following a diet was a common phenomenon in Asian countries. Her answer regarding diet was built on two factors: the influence of the mass media and

the traditional value of what is beautiful (lines 2-6)

I suggest that the main speech acts in this passage were the explanations in response to Eve's question. From the rhetorical relations in the passage, it can be seen that, the reasons for dieting were followed by a conclusive statement ('Therefore, many girls living in Asia always feel they are too heavy'.) The therefore-clause was used to express an explanatory relation of the causes (the media, tradition) and the result (Asian girls want to be thin). The main communicative goal attained by the speech act of answering the question was to answer Eve's question and provide a reasonable explanation of May's decision to diet.

Many girls in my country are on a diet. Maybe we are all influenced by mass media. When I watch TV and read magazines, most of the models and leading characters are all thin. Besides, in Chinese tradition, we think thinness means beauty. Therefore, many girls living in Asia always feel they are too heavy.
--

(Lines 2-4)

May started her reasoning with this statement, "Many girls in my country are on a diet." Grammatically speaking, it can be understood that May presented 'diet' as a general fact by using the present tense in the sentence. In addition, the subject of the sentence was 'many girls in my country'. This is another indication that May meant to describe dieting as a common phenomenon in Taiwanese society. Then she went on to give possible explanations.

The function of this answer can be interpreted in two ways: 1) to literally answer Eve's question; and 2) to explain her diet as a common behaviour in Taiwan. I want to address the second one, because it cannot be understood at the individual sentence level and must be discussed from the flow of the context.

As discussed above, Eve's email revealed her disapproval of dieting it could be reasonably inferred that with this attitude she also disapproved of May's deciding to diet. Thus, although not specifically requested by Eve, May still sensed the need to explain this decision to Eve. May attributed her dieting to the influence of the mass

media ('Maybe we are all influenced by mass media') and the traditional Chinese value ('in Chinese tradition, we think thinness means beauty'). In both sentences, May generalised the subject by using 'we'. In my interpretation, May wishes to justify her decision to diet by indicating that this decision is influenced and supported by many other people. The politeness implicatures carried in May's responses will be discussed in more detail below.

#### **5.2.4.2 May's (im)politeness analysis**

In answering Eve's question regarding diet, May showed cooperation in the interaction. Waldenfels (1994) argues that each question holds a claim beyond its verbal content. This suggests that a question when asked usually entails the speaker's attitudes or values. The above discussion of the interaction of this pair confirms Waldenfels' claim. In this email exchange, Eve's question did reflect her own view of dieting. But even though she did not approve of dieting, she did not want to offend May, who was already on a diet. Attempting to mitigate her opposition and emphasize her intention of maintaining a good relationship, Eve left some cues in her email to show her friendliness, such as suggesting possible explanations for Asian girls' obsession with dieting and her concern for her e-pal's health. To summarise, the two politeness strategies implemented in May's email were investigated to show the way in which she interpreted and responded to Eve's politeness moves. Below I discuss how May picked up the cues in Eve's email and developed her reasoning on it.

##### **a. Generalization**

Eve first showed her disapproval of dieting when May mentioned that she was on a diet. Eve did not wish May to feel that her disagreement was something personal to



May's behaviour. Thus Eve wrote, "All the girls I know living in China, HK, Thailand etc. always worry about their weight" (lines 4 &5). By stating the subject as Asian girls, Eve showed that she was not pointing her finger at May in particular.

Acknowledging Eve's intention to generalize the subject of the discussion, in May's reply, 'we' was used as the main subject. May further related the concept of diet to cultural values. She said, 'in Chinese tradition, we think thinness means beauty.' By extending the 'diet' topic to a cultural level (Chinese tradition), May implied the active role of Chinese tradition and the passive role of those who, people like herself, choose to diet in compliance with Chinese tradition.

Brown & Levinson suggest that generalisation strategy can keep possible face-threatening acts off-record since they allow interlocutors to decide whether the rules suggested in the generalised statement apply in this case or not (Brown & Levinson, 1987:226). The generalisation strategy used in this email exchange corresponds to Brown & Levinson's assertion. Eve asked a question which concerned the overall diet phenomenon in Asian countries. In response to Eve's question, May provided answers which brought in the influence of the mass media and cultural values. The generalisation of subject in the discussion allowed Eve, on the one hand, to reveal her stance without offending May and, on the other, prevented May from feeling impinged upon.

b. Repetition:

Eve showed her understanding of the possible reason for May to go on a diet by citing her personal experience (see the analysis of Eve's politeness strategies, above). Eve stated, '... my mum watches many HK tv shows (where the actress is very thin)' (Eve's email lines 5 &6). Identifying herself with Eve's reasoning, May also indicated

that the prevailing diet culture was promoted by the mass media. She stated, 'Maybe we are all influenced by mass media. When I watch TV and read magazines, most of the models and leading characters are all thin.' May's inference literally rephrased what Eve had previously stated. Brown & Levinson consider repetition a token of showing agreement. They suggest, "Agreement may also be stressed by repeating part or all of what the preceding speaker has said, in a conversation" (1987:112). The examples which they provide are ones when exactly the same words are repeated by the speaker. Although May did not repeat Eve word for word, it is quite apparent that May's statement echoed Eve's. While it can be argued that repetition is sometimes a positive strategy to show agreement, I argue that the definition of repetition should not be restricted to repeating the exact words. The content of what has been communicated should also be taken into account. In this email exchange, it is not difficult to correlate May's email with Eve's. May's repeated content should be regarded as a form of showing agreement to Eve's comments.

Seeing May's argument from another perspective, May's email not only showed support for Eve's email but also saved both her and Eve's face. As previously discussed, even though Eve disagreed with dieting, in consideration of her e-pal's face, she attributed the possible reasons to the influence of mass media. Thus, the support of Eve's reasoning would allow May to escape from the uncomfortable position of trying to defend herself for choosing to diet.

### **5.2.5 Discussion**

This presented analysis has attempted to find correlations between the two email entries. In summary, although Eve did not approve of dieting, she did not want to turn the discussion into a debate or fight either. She suggested some possible explanations

for the decision to diet. In response, May showed her supportiveness by using her own words to paraphrase what Eve had stated in the preceding email. Based on the above analysis, this discussion will mainly focus on two parts: a) is gender the answer to this cooperative interchange? And b) does disagreement always result in negative outcomes?

a) Is gender an explanation for this cooperative interchange?

From the email exchanges of this female pair, it is possible to infer something about 'gender'. Studies have shown that women tend to be more supportive and to look for connections, adding to and building on the contributions of others. Features of female talk, such as facilitative tags, agreeing comments, attentive listening and encouraging feedback can be seen as expressions of concern for others and a desire to make contact and strengthen relationships (see Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Holmes, 1995). I would suggest that these arguments about the role of gender in an interaction are partially valid for taking 'gender' as the only consideration will result in a neglect of the influence of other contextual factors, such as the interactive norms in this case (see Eve's speech act discussion).

Levinson defines the notion of activity as "a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, setting and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions" (1992:62). Similarly, Goodwin (1990:9) argues that the basic unit of investigation should be on the activities in speech, rather than cultures or gender or groups or individuals. Goodwin and Levinson's views coincide with Hymes' communicative event theory, which is the main analytical framework of this research. Hymes expands the scope of linguistics and proposes that the form and function of speech should

study in relation to other elements in the communicative event (see literature review). With similar views in interpreting this particular communicative event between May and Eve, I did not particularly relate their cooperative interaction with the gender issue since the mutually negotiated norms, topic and even the influence of the media of communication could have been the focal elements influencing the interaction. May's feedback on her e-interview also showed how computer-mediated communication affected her communication style. She stated, "I feel less direct in virtual interaction because I didn't hear e-pal's tone and facial expression. So, I would try not to ask offensive questions and not to make offensive remark" (May's e-interview). The fact that May was being more indirect due to the medium of her communication with Eve tended to contribute to the formation of their interactive norms and to her choices of politeness strategies.

b) Does disagreement always result in negative outcome?

From the above discussion, it is reasonable to conclude that a disagreement does not always result in a tension in the relationship, as many researchers have claimed. Many researchers suggest that the act of disagreement is face-threatening and dispreferred, since the act may endanger the interpersonal relationship (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sacks, 1973; Pomerantz, 1984). It is suggested that the disagreement will cause the interlocutor to lose face. I agree with this argument only in part. I agree that face loss might be the main reason when the disagreement has actually made a negative impact on the interlocutors' relationship. However, the above researchers suggestion that disagreement always has a negative impact on interpersonal relationships cannot satisfactorily explain the situations when disagreement results in membership-recognition (e.g. Kakava's suggestion (2002) that disagreement is a

common social practice in Greek society) or cooperation (as in the present email exchange, where Eve's disagreement did not cause tension between them. On the contrary, May even tried to enhance Eve's face by supporting Eve's arguments).

In my view, what is more important in determining the impact of a disagreement act is the context in which each act is performed. Scollon & Scollon also suggest that "many aspects of linguistic form depend on the speakers making some analysis of the relationships among themselves" (1995:35). Rodino (1997) also cautions against possible oversimplified viewing of gender as a natural taken-for-granted trait. She suggests that virtual interaction allows more freedom and flexibility and thus the traditional norms applied to binary gender are less apparent. In agreement with these views, the present analysis has sought to take other related factors into account. In this email interchange, Eve's disagreement took the normal interactive form of asking questions (see Eve's speech act analysis). Eve expressed her views on writing a polite email in her weekly journal. She stated that "the way questions are asked help in constituting a polite email" (week12 e-journal). Eve's disagreement is structured in a well-intended way and, in return for Eve's friendly remarks, May's responses mostly agreed with Eve's. In her reply, May paraphrased what Eve had suggested in her previous email. The cooperative interaction in this pair is evident.

### **5.3 Pair 5 – A relationship issue**

#### **5.3.1 Participants' profiles**

##### Helen

Helen was a 19-year-old British-born Chinese girl who spoke both English and Cantonese. She was a student at Bath University. She had had Chinese friends before attending this project. Despite learning Chinese language and culture, she wished to know more of the things that her e-pal's country was famous for.

##### Jane

Jane was a 21-year-old Taiwanese girl. She was taking a Chinese and English double-major at the National Taiwan Normal University. She joined this project because she wanted to make new friends and brush up her English writing skills.

#### **5.3.2 Communicative event**

At first Helen and Jane's email correspondence exchanged general background information mainly about such topics as education and interests. Gradually, they began from week 4 to talk about more personal things, such as identity problems, loss of friends and problematic relationships. The target communicative event occurred in their 6<sup>th</sup> week of their email correspondence. Jane told Helen that her colleague's boyfriend had split up with her colleague for no good reason. She expressed her views on this issue. Helen analysed what the man was trying to do and said that she completely empathised with Jane's friend. Jane wrote to say that she was happy that Helen held the same view as she had done on this issue. The actual message content of this communicative continued for three consecutive emails. These are presented below:

Extract K. Week 6 Jane to Helen

8 Yesterday when I was chatting with my colleague (I work part-time at a  
9 publisher), she told me her British boyfriend broke up with her because he  
10 felt she's becoming "too close to his inner world". After they've been dating  
11 for almost 2 years, don't you think that's ridiculous? We both regarded it as  
12 nothing but a nasty excuse and that hurt my colleague very much. I know  
13 most British people are nice and gentle, but this 45-year-old guy, might be  
14 an exception. :P It may sounds too extreme for you, but I just feel really  
15 sorry for my friend.

Extract L. Week 6 Helen to Jane

15 I hope your friend is feeling better. :) Personally I do not consider her  
16 ex-boyfriend's excuse a plausible reason to break up their relationship. His  
17 reasoning does not make sense and may cause your friend to feel it was her  
18 fault and as a result she might feel unnecessary guilt. I completely  
19 empathise with your friend, I find that western societies hold less  
20 importance for relationships than asian societies. They are generally much  
21 more 隨便 with regards to relationships.

Extract M. Week7 Jane to Helen

6 I'm glad that you hold the same opinion with me on my friend's breakup  
7 with that guy. I agree that western societies don't seem relationships as  
8 serious as asians do.  
\*\*\*  
14 Fairly speaking, some asian girls are just unreasonably obsessed  
15 with westerners; maybe that's why some of them act so rude to asian girls.

(\*\*\* intervening sentences are omitted)

From the above extracts, I would infer that the purposes of this communicative event are twofold. Wittgenstein (1958) argues that the linguistic meaning and the pragmatic meaning of speech should be considered separately. It is suggested that we can distinguish what sentences mean from the acts actually performed in uttering them. Although it is essential to investigate speech from the standpoint of its linguistic meaning and pragmatic aspect, the word 'pragmatics' will be replaced by 'discourse'. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the use of pragmatic suggests a confined investigation leading to a goal-oriented view of the function of speech. It does not sufficiently explain the other factors which influence the use of any particular speech

act. Therefore, instead of pragmatics, the analysis in this study will be conducted in terms of its semantic (linguistic) meaning and discourse meaning.

Linguistically, Jane described an unhappy ending to her colleague's relationship. Besides telling her colleague's story, Jane commented on the issue. In Helen's reply, she expressed her sympathy with Jane's colleague and also her approval of Jane's interpretation of the issue. The goal of this communicative event on the sentence level was to exchange views on the issues arising from a 'breakup'.

From the discourse perspective, in addition to sharing views on this incident, Jane's email content carried the implication of seeking agreement from Helen. In response to Jane's email, Helen's reply transmitted a sense of supportiveness. By showing sympathy and agreeing with Jane's views, Helen aligned herself with Jane. These two communicative goals were realised by a number of speech acts identified in their emails.

### **5.3.3 Analysis of Jane's email**

#### **5.3.3.1 Jane's speech act analysis**

Jane depicted her colleague's relationship problem and passed judgment on her colleague's boyfriend. Her intention of sharing her feelings on this subject with Helen can be seen from the sentences below.

don't you think that's ridiculous? We both regarded it as nothing but a nasty excuse and that hurt my colleague very much.
--

(Lines 11 & 12)

From the semantic perspective, Jane first asked Helen to express her feelings on this issue. Following the question, Jane stated her views. In the traditional view, questions are categorised as directives (see Searle, 1996:147-8; Bach and Harnish, 1979:47-8). Although questions are labelled directive acts, I would argue that the main function of the question was to prompt Jane's next comment ('We both



regarded it as nothing but a nasty excuse and that hurt my colleague very much'.) and possibly seek agreement from her e-pal. Therefore, the reply to this question did not seem vital here. Researchers have suggested that some questions, such as rhetorical questions, are posed without the expectation of an answer (see Lyons, 1995:452; Sperber and Wilson, 1995:249-54). Ilie suggests that, "A rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser's commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressees' mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity" (Ilie, 1999:128, cited by Schaffer, 2005:434). A preliminary observation confirms Ilie's argument about the use of rhetorical question in discourse. I suggest that the question and the following sentence work together to form an expressive act, whose aim is to show Jane's own opinion.

In line12, the verb 'regard' indicated that 'We' (Jane and perhaps her colleagues) were the subjects who made this comment. It was not difficult to tell that Jane meant to express her own view of this issue and perhaps even reveal her personal values in relationships. Searle (1969, 1979) defines the act of describing reactions to a situation as an expressive act. Habermas (1985) also suggests that acts of expression are used to present something from the subjective world of the speaker. In accord with Searle and Habermas' descriptions, line11/12 seems to be an expressive act. In addition, the question before the expressive statement, as discussed above, was used to lay stress on her earlier and later points. For this reason, I conclude that the question and the statement work hand in hand to fulfil Jane's intention of expressing her attitude to the event and therefore constitute an expressive act.

### 5.3.3.2 Jane's (im)politeness analysis

Having looked at the speech act used in Jane's email, I now want to discuss some of the politeness strategies embedded in the sentences. As discussed above, Jane aimed to express her feelings about this breakup incident. Even though Jane might believe that women should normally feel sorry for her colleague and despise her boyfriend's behaviour when they hear the story, Jane's awareness of the fact that the man is British might indirectly make Helen feel embarrassed, since Helen is a British-born Chinese.

I know most British people are nice and gentle, but this 45-year-old guy, might be an exception. :P It may sounds too extreme for you, but I just feel really sorry for my friend.
--

(Lines 12- 15)

In lines 12-14, Jane showed that she did not state her opinions of all British people but of this man in particular. In effect, Jane presupposed that Helen's face might be threatened by Jane's negative remark on a British man because Helen was also British. Thus Jane showed her awareness that British people by and large are 'nice and gentle'. To further mitigate the possible face-threatening outcome from her statement, Jane gave a reason for her potentially offensive argument (lines14 &15). Jane's determination not to offend Helen conformed to Brown & Levinson's negative politeness strategy, which suggests that "any infringement of hearer's territory is recognized and as such is not undertaken lightly" (Brown & Levinson, 1987). 'It may sounds too extreme for you' shows Jane's awareness of the possible negative feelings Helen might have; while 'but I just feel really sorry for my friend' indicates her reluctance to have said what she did about the man.

Another politeness strategy which can be identified from the sentence was the emoticons (see line14) I suggest that the emoticons were used in this case as a nonverbal strategy to mitigate the impact carried by the words in lines12-14, 'I know

most British people are nice and gentle, but this 45-year-old guy, might be an exception. :P'. As discussed earlier, the content was considered a potential FTA since Helen's nationality was British and criticism of a particular British man might have suggested bad feelings toward Helen as another British person. Thus Jane inserted an emoticon “:P” at the end to soften her tone a little. “:P” is a portrait of a person's face with two eyes and a protruding tongue. It is generally used to convey a sense of the speaker's wittiness and naughtiness. In order to not make the comment on the British man sound too harsh, the emoticon was applied.

Jane was a habitual user of emoticons. She used them from her very first email. Helen, however, did not use emoticons in the first week. Instead, she used words to imitate laughter, i.e. haha. But from the second week, Helen started using emoticons like Jane's. Helen made such comments on the emoticons in her email interview as, “The use of emotive icons such as :p or :) would imply my e-pal was happy/smiling/laughing which often encourages me to smile/laugh too and use the same emotive icons in return.” And Helen's positive feelings toward Jane's use of emoticons reinforce the role of emoticons in their email correspondence. Jane wrote in her email interview, “I found that she used “XD” which really made me feel great. From now on, I used these icons more and more.” The symbol of “XD” (X is the eyes and the D is the mouth) is frequently used to mean ‘laughing out loud’. Based on their feedbacks regarding the use of emoticons, it may safely be said that the politeness strategy in line 14 was to use the positive impact of emoticons to mitigate the rather negative comment on the British man.

The modal ‘might’ in the sentence worked collaboratively with the icon- “:P” to show the uncertainty of her comment. To hedge her opinion with the modal (might), Jane wished to reserve space for different opinions. Brown & Levinson suggest that

hedges “are the most important linguistic means of satisfying the speaker’s want, DON’T ASSUME H IS ABLE/WILLING TO DO A” (1987:146). Modifying the opinions which she had already proposed, Jane manifested her intention of not presupposing support from Helen.

### **5.3.4 Analysis of Helen’s email**

#### **5.3.4.1 Helen’s speech act analysis**

In response to Jane’s comment on her colleague’s British boyfriend, Helen first considered Jane’s colleague (lines15 &16) and then addressed Jane’s views in a way which shows her agreement with them (lines17-21). These two goals were also realised in an expressive act. The expressive act carried out Helen’s intention of a) expressing her opinions and; b) showing commiseration.

##### **a. Expressing her opinions:**

In order to explicitly show her views as similar to Jane’s, the subject of the sentence ‘I’ was made clear to emphasize who the addresser was. By stating herself as the one who held that viewpoint, Helen showed direct support for Jane’s position in this issue. For example, ‘Personally *I* do not consider her ex-boyfriend’s excuse a plausible reason to break up their relationship.’ ‘*I* find that western societies hold less importance for relationships than asian societies.’(lines 15 &19, italics mine). Holmes (1995) cites Herbert’s finding that women tend to use personalized forms as strategies to show personal involvement.

##### **b. Showing commiseration:**

When Jane told Helen about her colleague’s story, Helen showed empathy

toward Jane's colleague by stating, "I completely empathise with your friend..." Leech (1983) suggests that speech acts expressing commiseration and condolences are usually associated with showing sympathy or empathy. Tannen (1990) and Michand & Warner (1997) further suggest that commiserative responses are frequently seen in evaluative responses during extended discourse exchanges. In this case, during the exchange of viewpoints on a relationship problem, the expressive act aimed to show sympathy with Jane's colleague. The adverb "completely" was added to stress the latter emotive verb "empathise". This was done to increase the degree of commiseration. Furthermore, the sincerity of Helen's empathy with Jane's colleague was reinforced by the way in which Helen structured the passage. Helen first stated her opinion on this incident before showing empathy to Jane's colleague. Her personal opinions gave reasons for her empathy's being sensible and therefore more likely to be sincere.

#### **5.3.4.2 Helen's (im)politeness analysis**

Helen's two communicative goals – expressing her views and showing empathy – were realised by the expressive act. After discussing the literal meanings of the act, I now turn to the politeness meanings of the act. The politeness meanings of the expressive act can be identified in three functions: a) building rapport, b) forging an alliance and; c) saving face.

##### **a. Building rapport:**

In lines 18 & 19 "I *completely* empathise with your friend ..." (italics mine), Helen showed sympathy with Jane's colleague. In order to show her emotion in words, Helen used intensifiers (completely) to increase the intensity of expression of her

feelings. Unlike face-to-face interaction, email interaction offers no facial expressions, nor varieties of pitch in the voices to clarify the emotional elements. Hence, the intensifiers became essential in facilitating the feelings transmission. Brown & Levinson also (1987) suggest that the acts of approval and sympathy are often performed with “exaggerated intonation, stress and other aspects of prosodics, as well as with intensifying modifiers” (1987:104). Although these mood markers are usually easier to identify in spoken conversation, they still exist in written data.

In addition, I would argue that by showing sympathy to Jane’s colleague, Helen was at the same time showing support for Jane’s feelings. Helen did not know Jane’s colleague; moreover, she had only learned about the story from Jane. Helen’s complete sympathy toward Jane’s colleague was based on her support for Jane’s feelings about the story. The supportive act presumably had a positive impact on their relationship. Both Helen and Jane’s email interview responses support my interpretation. Helen wrote in her email interview that, “I feel that trying to understand another person’s situations and feelings can help to progress a friendship or relationship as you feel you have something in common.” Jane also wrote, “By showing empathy, I really felt like we’re much closer...”

b. Forging an alliance:

Helen was a British-Born Chinese. Her parents were from Hong Kong, thus she can speak Cantonese and, as she indicated in her first week’s introductory email, she knew some basics of Chinese culture and language but she was not confident about composing all her emails in Chinese. For this reason, English was still their main language in composing emails.

However, Helen particularly used a Chinese phrase in the middle of her sentence

in this email. ‘They are generally much more 隨便 (suei bian) with regards to relationships’ (lines 20 &21). The Chinese phrase 隨便(suei bian) is adjectival and is used to describe a person who acts for his/her own pleasure. It is similar to one of the meanings of the English word ‘casual’. I would interpret this as Helen’s use of a Chinese phrase in order to evoke in-group identity with Jane. Brown & Levinson (1987:110) judge the phenomenon of code-switching, which is associated with in-group identity, to be a “potential way of encoding positive politeness when redress is required by an FTA”. In this case, the FTA was presumably the accusation Jane made about her colleague’s *British* boyfriend. Since Helen’s nationality was also British, Jane’s accusation, though not against all British, might have threatened Helen’s face. Thus, to save herself from losing face, Helen used a positive politeness strategy to avoid the possible embarrassment attributed to her identity.

The code-switching would not only remind Jane of Helen’s Chinese heritage, but also bring solidarity to their relationship. By showing support to Jane’s argument in Jane’s mother tongue, Helen was implying her alliance with Jane.

c. Saving face:

As mentioned above, Jane’s criticism of the British man’s behaviour might pose a threat to Helen’s face, since Helen is a British-born Chinese and might feel uncomfortable to hear adverse criticism of a British person. Thus Helen avoided the potential threat by defocusing from the word ‘British’ and used instead the word ‘western’, which is a more general term (see below)

...I find that western societies hold less importance for relationships than asian societies.
---

(lines 19-20)

Not placing the focus on the word ‘British’ as she addressed her points seemed to

dilute the potential threat to her British identity. It is also worth noting that Helen compared the relationship values of ‘western societies’ with those of ‘asian societies’. She seemed to point out the cultural differences between the two societies. And the different values might be the cause of the breakup. By pointing out the differences, Helen reminded Jane of the cultural elements in the incident. The discussion was then taken to the cultural level in which no specific country was named.

Helen’s intention of shifting focus from ‘British’ to ‘western societies’ was successfully transmitted to Jane since Jane later used ‘western societies’ instead of ‘British’ in her reply. “I agree that western societies don’t seem relationships as serious as Asians” (extract M, lines 7-8).

### **5.3.5 Discussion**

By expressing opinions and thoughts about a third party’s relationship problem, Helen and Jane kept a safe distance from this potentially face-threatening topic. The safe distance allowed them to express their views on relationships more freely since neither they nor their e-pals were involved in this relationship problem. Moreover, the sharing and supporting of one another’s positions, as discussed previously, were effective ways of building rapport.

Holmes suggests that “women are more likely to use positive politeness than men”; thus, she is asserting that “women’s utterances show evidence of concern for the feelings of the people they are talking to more often and more explicitly than men’s do.” (Holmes, 1995:6). Both Helen and Jane considered this kind of supportive interaction common among female friends. Jane wrote in her email interview that, “I think it’s a basic element for girls to interact with others.” Helen also wrote in her email interview that, “Females have a tendency to express and share emotions and



feelings more than men and I feel that women need that kind of support more than men.” Although Helen and Jane’s reflections both conformed to Holmes’ assertion, I would suggest that the topic and the modality of the interaction played an important part in this context. Mills (2002) argues that the correlation of gender identity with politeness strategies should not be taken as a stereotypical phenomenon. She claims that rather than gender identity itself controlling the way which men and women talk, it is people’s perception of what is suitable behaviour for men and women that influences our behaviour. Thus, the analysis of politeness of gender should be taken to the discourse level. In line with Mills’ argument, I also deem it important to investigate the elements which constitute an appropriate ‘act’ over a longer stretch of interaction and to take into consideration other contextual factors. Searle (1992: 8) rightly suggests that each speech act creates a space of possibilities of appropriate response speech acts. In other words, when certain speech acts are produced under certain situations, some forms of responses are expected. Searle’s point is well confirmed by this pair. When Jane told Helen about her friend’s breakup issue and complained about the behaviour of her colleague’s boyfriend, it was not very likely that she was expecting a dispute from Helen. It might be true that gender identity played an important role in this exchange, but I would argue that the gender element became more noticeable because of other contextual factors, such as their previously formed interactive norms, the topic under discussion and the flow of the actual interchange. In short, the investigation of this exchange by Helen and Jane showed the way in which negative comment about a third party’s problem can become a positive boost to friendship. Furthermore, the emails also demonstrated how they showed their support for one another’s feelings by stating similar views and how they used an empathetic tone to build up rapport.

## **5.4 Pair 6 – Offensive questions**

### **5.4.1 Participants' profiles**

#### Doris

Doris was a 27 year-old single mother. At the time she joined this project, she was working and studying at the same time. While she acted as an academic advisor, she was also studying for a master's degree in applied linguistics. She joined the project in the hope of learning more about Eastern culture and language and she also hoped to see what stereotypes and opinions people might have of the US.

#### Joy

Joy had just got a degree in English and was doing her teaching internship in a high school. She had been learning English since she was 13 years old. She liked reading novels by Third World writers. Her main reason to join this project was to learn more about Western culture.

### **5.4.2 Communicative event**

In their first email, Doris and Joy had negotiated and set up an email communicative routine of asking questions at the end of every email. Their subjects ranged from English literature to life experience. They spent the first couple of weeks asking and writing about their favourite books and movies. When these topics were exhausted, they started to ask new questions which were more culture-specific, such as national holidays, tipping culture, accents, etc.

It was an interactive routine for Doris and Joy to include in their replies the answers to their e-pal's previous email questions. In addition, since they tended to start the email by these answers, the opening and closing formalities were often

neglected. Direct answers to their e-pal's questions usually started their emails. The Q & A communicative norm had efficiently enabled them to get to know their e-pal's social and cultural background. The analysis for this pair will focus on the correspondence in week 11 when the communicative event in question took place. The email of week10 is shown in order to amplify understanding of the context.

The communicative event in question took place when Joy followed their usual norm of interaction and asked a question regarding what are the stereotypes about Americans at the end of her email. In order to make her question clear, she gave the example of people's usually connecting the Mafia with Italians. The following week, when Joy received no reply from Doris' reply, she wrote a short apologetic email hoping to discover if she had offended her e-pal. After receiving this second email, Doris immediately wrote back to apologise for not having been able to write back sooner. Unlike their usual form of interaction, these emails included greetings and salutations. Further investigation will be presented through the analysis of the speech acts and (im)politeness strategies used in their emails.

Extract N. Week10 Joy to Doris

	***
44	i hope the history of modern China and Taiwan doesn't bore you too much, i felt
45	like i could write a book on the topic.
46	What might be some of the stereotypes people have toward Americans
47	becuase of the images presented in the movies? (Italians are often
48	associated with the Mafia, for example.)

(\*\*\* intervening sentences are omitted)

Extract O. Week11 Joy to Doris

1	Hi Doris,
2	It has been a while since i last received your email. I hope it is because
3	you've been busy these days or you didn't receive my email, not because
4	my email has offended you in any way. If it is, i apologize and would really
5	appreciate it if you tell me.
6	Joy

#### Extract P. Week11 Doris to Joy

1	Dear Joy,
2	Sorry I haven't written in so long. All my responsibilities needed my
3	attention at the same time recently and I've been spread a little thin.
	***
29	Doris

(\*\*\* intervening sentences are omitted)

### **5.4.3 Analysis Joy's email**

#### **5.4.3.1 Joy's speech act analysis**

Fraser & Nolen (2003) point out that every contact of interaction may entail a renegotiation of interactive agreement among the interlocutors. That is to say, even with the same interactants, the agreed communicative norm can alter when some elements in the interaction are changed. This view is similar to Hymes' point in his ethnography of communication, where 'norm' is considered one of the important influences on the interactions (see Chapter 2 for more details).

As stated above, asking and answering questions was a norm of Joy and Doris' interaction. This norm of interaction was maintained until week 11, when Doris did not reply to Joy's previous email. The absence of a reply from Doris in week 10 had disturbed the usual course of their interaction. Uncertain about the reason for this absence, Joy composed another email with a view to finding out what had happened between them. In Joy's email, she employed expressive speech act to achieve her intention. The expressive speech acts were apology and appreciation. These two speech acts were performed within the same sentence (lines 4-5), using two conditional clauses. They will be dealt with in terms of their semantic formulas and pragmatic function in the context.

a. Apology:

Email was the only means of communication in this project; the participants had no other ways of knowing the feelings of their e-pals. Thus Doris' 'silence' demanded some interpretation from Joy. Joy made three inferences: 1) Doris was busy, 2) Doris never received Joy's previous email and 3) Joy had offended Doris (see Extract N, lines 2-4). Joy made logical inferences, possibly based on her background knowledge. The first two inferences could be made on the basis of her past interactive experience with Doris. The delay of emails due both to business and technical problems had occurred before. Joy said that she hoped that Doris had had one of the first two indicated reasons for not replying, and had not kept silent for the third possible reason: that Joy had offended her. Significantly, in ordering the three inferences, Joy had put possible 'offence' last. At this point, Joy had already shown her unwillingness to offend Doris, since she clearly wished to understand that the reason for Doris' non-reply was either the first or second inference.

However, if the reason turned out to be the third one, even without knowing what the offence might be, Joy made a direct apology ("If it is, i apologize and would really appreciate it if you tell me."). The apologetic statement was made with the performative verb 'apologize'. In Searle's (1976) typology, apologising represents an expressive speech act in which the speaker expresses his/her psychological attitude toward some state of affairs. Joy's apology was identified in a conditional sentence. Syntactically, for a conditional sentence, the result is the main clause while the subordinate clause is the condition. In this case, the main clause was "I apologize" and the subordinate one was "if it is". The subject for the subordinate clause was a pronoun, 'it', which referred to her previous sentence, "my email has offended you in any way"(line4). In other words, Joy's apology stood only if the offence had occurred.

b. Appreciation:

The second expressive speech act in the sentence was the act of showing gratitude (line 5). The performative verb 'appreciate' is normally used to express one's gratitude. Searle (1969: 67) notes that the act (A) of showing appreciation from the speaker (S) to the hearer (H) needs to be carried out in the following steps: 1) Past act A done by H; 2) A benefits S and S believes A benefits S; 3) S feels grateful or appreciative for A; 4) counts A as worth an expression of gratitude or appreciation. Applying this pattern to Joy's sentence, it can be seen that the sentence does not altogether conform. First of all, Joy's appreciation was not for a past act but for a future act which had not yet happened. Second, even if Doris told Joy what the offence was, this could hardly be seen as a benefit to Joy. Thus, rather than seeing the statement as an expression of gratitude because of the performative verb 'appreciate', it might make more sense to judge it from its pragmatic function in the context.

Vanderveken (2001) points out the importance of distinguishing between illocutionary force, on the one hand, and performative verbs and illocutionary force markers, on the other, due to the perspicuous nature of language. His point can be well exemplified in Joy's email. Although the performative verb 'appreciate' was identified in the sentence, it did not necessary mean that the real intention of this sentence was to show appreciation. Syntactically, what follows the verb 'appreciate' is the conditional (if) clause. For the conditional clause, the result is the main clause ('would really appreciate') and the condition ('if you tell me') is a subordinate clause. In other words, Joy's appreciation was only valid if Doris told her. The main force of this statement was to plead for an answer. Thus, rather than interpreting the sentence as an expression of appreciation, it should be considered as a politic way of requesting an explanation. Moreover, since the two speech acts were used within one sentence,

they should not be considered separately. Seen in company with the speech act of apologising, the latter request in its appreciative tone seems to reinforce her stance of being ignorant of any reason for offence. To apologise for something she was not aware of, Joy had again showed that, even if Doris was offended by Joy's email, Joy had not caused offence on purpose.

Apart from the use of the two speech acts to attain a communicative goal (unintended offence), I suggest that these two speech acts (apology and appreciation) transmitted a sense both of distance and of deference. Wolfson (1992:205) in this connection observes that what members of a particular society thank or apologise for usually reflects its values because the performance of these speech acts usually involves the assessment of others' behaviour, character, status etc. Similarly, Goffman (1967) suggests that the sense of 'appreciation' conveyed to the hearer reflects the speaker's personal values to the hearer, gives status to the hearer and also shows the speaker's values. By Joy's apology and pleading for an explanation of any possible offence she might have committed, with gratitude for being told of it, she conveyed her assessment of the situation as her having possibly offended Doris, since Doris had reacted by silence. Joy's evaluation of the situation thus influenced the way she composed her email. Her intended communicative goal should not be understood independent of the whole context. Gilbert (1999) also suggests that "a proposition expressed by a speech act would itself not be understood linguistically, but re-interpreted as a message with manifold aspect" (p.3). That is to say, a speech act should be understood as a dynamic linguistic performance. The meaning entailed by a speech act is not static, with fixed meaning. In this section, the linguistic aspects of the speech acts were discussed. What follows is discussion of the (im)politeness meanings carried in Joy's email.

#### **5.4.3.2 Joy's (im)politeness analysis**

As mentioned earlier, 'asking and answering questions' was a routine which governed Joy and Doris' email interaction. Joy and Doris' questions were usually culturally-oriented. Their identities as an American and a Taiwanese seemed to make them experts in answering culture-specific questions. Joy wrote in her e-interview that "As an English major, I was familiar with certain features of American culture, such as its emphasis on independence. I felt that I needed to bring up more specific questions to learn something I didn't know. Sharing of life experiences might also reveal cultural differences, but asking questions is certainly a more direct way." Joy's statement revealed her eagerness to learn about American culture through asking questions.

When Doris did not reply to Joy's question about the stereotypes which people have of Americans, Joy was immediately alert to the situation. Joy composed another email to ask if her previous email had offended Doris. Joy was asked in her e-interview about whether her apology was intended to invite her e-pal back to the conversation or was to show regret for a possible offence. Joy reflected, "It's a bit of both. I thought my questions about people's stereotypes toward Americans might have offended her. The answers I had in mind were more negative than positive." Locher (2005) argues that no utterance is inherently polite or impolite, since it is "a discursive concept arising out of interactants' perceptions and judgments of their own and others' verbal behavior" (p.10). From Locher's perspective, then, in theory, Joy's question is not impolite in its linguistic nature. Yet Joy still felt that she might have offended Doris by asking the question. It is surmised that Joy assessed her question as a possible threat because her own stereotypes of Americans were fairly negative. Thus, asking Doris, an American, to answer a potential self face-threatening question might



have affronted Doris.

Given the above, it could be surmised that Joy's apology was targeted to save Doris' negative face by showing Joy's reluctance to impinge on it and to preserve the relationship by inviting her e-pal back to the correspondence. The intended communicative results were pursued by the following strategies:

a. Greetings:

As noted above, Joy and Doris' emails normally omitted greetings and address terms. However, in this particular email, Joy started her email with a vocative ('hi') and her e-pal's name, which was not a very common procedure in their email correspondence. Before this present email, Joy and Doris had used only one greeting when a similar situation occurred on the 3<sup>rd</sup> week. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> week, Doris wrote to apologise for the delay of her reply due to some technical problem and Joy's reply to that email also began with a greeting. Other than that incident, Doris and Joy always wrote to each other without phatic conversation, such as 'how are you?'. It was interesting to note that greetings and apologies co-occurred in both cases. In my view, greeting and the address term were employed in this apology context in order to clearly show to whom the apology was addressed. It could be that Joy was hoping to make a proper apology in order to show her sincerity in resuming their harmonious relations.

Goffman (1967) asserts that greetings, as a politeness marker, target the addressee's face needs. Since Joy indicated in her e-interview that she had a feeling that she might have threatened Doris' negative face by asking her to answer such a 'stereotype' question, it was possible that Joy used greeting to show that she meant no disrespect for her e-pal, if Doris had been offended by Joy's question. Eckert &

McConnell-Ginet (2003) propose that the presence of a greeting and the type of greeting can set the tone for the email conversation that follows. Similarly, Laver (1981:304) also suggests that “routines of greeting and parting, far from being relatively meaningless and mechanical social behaviour’...[are] extremely important strategies for the negotiation and control of social identity and social relationship between participants in a conversation.” These researchers all point out the role of greeting as a strategy of constructing meanings and negotiation relationships with the addressee(s). In line with these researchers, it is also my view that Joy’s brief greeting, though it made the email seem more formal than usual, aimed to re-set her tone as a more respectful one.

b. showing reluctance to commit the FTA

As mentioned above, Joy acknowledged in her e-interview that she thought she might have offended Doris by asking the question (about stereotypes). However, when she wrote to Doris, Joy did not try to confirm whether her question had offended Doris or not. Instead, Joy apologised and showed her complete ignorance of what the offence could have been. I interpret this as Joy’s showing unawareness of committing an FTA and Joy indirectly expressing her wish not to offend her e-pal. Brown & Levinson (1987:187) set out two ways of showing awareness and respect of H’s territory: 1) recognise the FTA and apologise; 2) show reluctance to impose on H. In Joy’s case, she made a direct apology without naming any act as an FTA. Joy’s apology was made under a conditional clause (If it is, i apologize and would really appreciate it if you tell me.) The apology in the conditional clause is believed to carry two pragmatic functions in this context.

The first function was to minimise the responsibility to be admitted. The apology

would only be valid if there had been an offence. In this sense, Joy did not commit herself in taking the blame for one. Yet, she made a condition for the apology to be effective: that Doris must confirm that Joy had offended her. Deutschmann also suggests that the apology in a conditional clause, which aims at “minimizing the responsibility of the speaker for the offence”, reveals another important function of apologies, namely “restoring the speaker’s self-image” (Deutschmann,2003:103).

Another function was to show Joy’s reluctance to offend Doris. Even though Joy made a straightforward apology, she did not admit any offence. In addition, to further stress her unawareness of what the offence might be, what she wrote after the apology was a polite request in an appreciative tone for an explanation of what the offence was. Joy used the adverb “really” to stress her gratitude, which made her appreciation seemed more emphatic and sincere. The sincere request for an answer about any offence transmitted the message that Joy could not possibly want to offend Doris on purpose, when Joy did not even know what the offence was. Brown & Levinson (1987) suggest that dissociating the speaker from the FTA is an implicit way of showing reluctance on the speaker’s account to perform the FTA. “Because S bothers to dissociate himself from the FTA of H and to suggest that he is not responsible or not alone involved, S conversationally implicates that he is reluctant to impinge” (ibid.,187). Brown & Levinson’s statement covers Joy’s avoiding mention of her own apprehension of the reasons for Doris’ silence. Based on Brown & Levinson’s negative politeness theory, the case could be that, by showing unawareness of the offence, Joy dissociated herself from the offence, which “implicitly convey[s] a reluctance on the part of S to impose on H” (Brown & Levinson, 1987:187).

Below I turn to Doris’ response to Joy’s email.

#### **5.4.4 Analysis of Doris' email**

##### **5.4.4.1 Doris' speech act analysis**

In response to Joy's apology and enquiry about some offence, Doris too made an apology, followed by a reason for her late reply (see lines 2-3). In this section, I discuss the speech acts employed in Doris' reply to Joy's week 11 email.

Instead of reacting to Joy's apology, Doris started by offering her own apology. The pragmatic complexity of an apology often requires more detailed analysis, since apologies can serve as "a routine behaviour" or "a rhetorical device introducing a challenge" (Deutschmann, 2003: 49). On this basis, Doris' apology will be investigated in terms of the lexeme used, the syntactic structures in which it appears and its pragmatic function in the context. Numerous studies have been conducted on the speech act of apologising (see Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Owen, 1983; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Holmes, 1990; Aijmer, 1996). These all point out that the apologetic expressions contain such words as *sorry*, *excuse*, *apologise*, etc. Among these expressions, 'sorry' is the most common formulaic expression of apology used in English. In line 2, Doris began her sentence with the lexeme 'sorry'. Following the word 'sorry' was the reason for her apology ('I haven't written in so long.') Doris' apology is considered to be a response to Joy's apology and enquiry for the following reasons. First, Joy's week 10 email was composed on 10<sup>th</sup> October. No replies were made from Doris for a week. Joy then wrote another email in an apologetic tone to enquire about the situation on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October. Doris replied to this email the very same day. Doris' prompt reply indicates that after reading Joy's week 11 email, she felt that the situation needed her immediate attention. Second, from the syntactic point of view, Doris put forward her apology at the very beginning of her email. It can be surmised that Doris considered an explanation of her non-response the previous week

to be the primary issue to deal with in this email. From these two observations, it can be conjectured that Doris' apology was made in response to Joy's apology.

Before going into the analysis of Doris' response, I should consider Doris' possible attitude toward Joy's 'stereotype' question, since the question was what Joy considered to be the probable source of offence. Hence, to analyse Doris' response in greater depth, two additional references should be taken into considerations. First, Doris mentioned in her pre-survey questionnaire that she was hoping to learn more about popular stereotypes of Americans. This being the case, it was unlikely that she would be offended if Joy raised a similar question. Second, Doris wrote in her week 8 journal that, 'It would be pretty hard for my e-pal to ask a question that I wouldn't answer. As long as the question is asked with a spirit of curiosity and in the quest for knowledge and awareness, I think I have a responsibility to answer as accurately as I can.' In Doris' journal, she revealed her attitude in tackling questions from her e-pal. This again confirmed that her reply would not have been delayed because of Joy's question. After getting a clearer idea of Doris' likely attitude to Joy's question, I now turn to the linguistic and semantic meanings in Doris' apology.

Unlike Joy's apology, which lacked a specific object, Doris followed her apology with an explanation: "All my responsibilities needed my attention at the same time recently and I've been spread a little thin" (lines 2-3). In order to stress her busyness, the adjective 'all' was used to describe her heavy workload. To stress her tight schedule, the phrase 'at the same time' was used to highlight the sense of pressure. They worked together to create a simple message, that Doris was busy. Yet instead of giving a simple statement ('I was busy'), Doris went to the trouble of giving details about her current life. In my view, Doris gave these details in the hope of gaining Joy's understanding, since Joy already knew that Doris was currently working,

studying and taking care of a child from their past email correspondence.

Doris then wrote, “I’ve been spread a little thin” (line3). “Spreading oneself thin” is an idiom to describe a person who tries to deal with too many things at the same time. The meaning of the idiom again echoed Doris’ previous sentence, which emphasised all her responsibilities. Since these two sentences carried very similar meaning, the latter sentence might work as an intensifier to strengthen the sense of her busyness. In short, the apology for the neglect of maintaining email correspondence and the reasonable explanation were aimed to clarify the real reason for Doris’ non-reply, which was not an unintentional offence by Joy. This message indirectly released Joy from the apology since Joy’s apology, as discussed previously, was only valid on condition that the offence did exist.

Even though Joy was then freed from blame for Doris’ non-response, Joy’s face could still have been damaged since Doris’ explanation about her busyness, though proffered as a reasonable excuse for her late reply, could also mean that Joy’s email was not as important as other things in Doris’ life. In order to make up for Joy’s face loss, Doris’ email employed some politeness strategies which aimed to reassure Joy about their relationship with and to boost Joy’s positive face. They are discussed below.

#### **5.4.4.2 Doris’ (im)politeness analysis**

In this section, the politeness indicators carried in Doris’ reply are investigated. There were mainly two politeness components which drew my attention in Doris’ response, namely the greeting formula and the apology. Each component will be dealt with in terms of its pragmatic function in the overall context below.

#### a. Greeting

As mentioned earlier, greeting was not part of their email routine. They usually started the email without any greetings or address terms. Baron (2003) suggests that email, as a form of writing, falls between a letter and a note. Kankaanranta (2005) further remarks that email is a descendant of the US internal memo. Thus email writers who are familiar with the memo format are more likely to adopt the no-greeting style of email writing. Doris' email writing style seemed to conform to this pattern. Greetings or address terms were omitted in Doris' emails after the first week. Joy, who started her email with a greeting in the first week, later adopted the 'no-salutation' writing style. However, this kind of writing style would admit salutations when an apology was to be written in the email. As seen, in this communicative event, they both greeted each other and included formal salutations. As mentioned above, Joy's greeting conveyed a sense of deference toward Doris. Paradoxical though it may seem, even though her greeting revealed deference toward the other person, it could also have increased the distance between the two participants. Thus, in contrast to Joy's greeting of 'hi', the endearment term 'dear' was used to refer to Joy in Doris' email. Judging from the situation, the term 'dear' could be used to help denote how Doris was not unhappy about Joy's question and still considered Joy as a good friend.

Following the greeting, Doris apologised. In my interpretation the combined use of greetings and an apology in Doris' email was meant to reassure Joy about Doris' continued friendly relationship with Joy. Moreover, greetings here could also function as a gesture of solidarity with Joy, which could serve as a cushion to alleviate the harm brought by the putative FTA which required an apology. Kankaanranta (2005) notes that the use of greetings gives the message a positive tone and it "thus contributes to the maintenance of good social relations" (p.359). In line with

Kankaanranta's argument, I find that Doris' greeting in this communicative event seems to act as an additional politeness marker to ensure her good relationship with Joy.

#### b. Apology

The act of apology, as proposed by Deutschmann (2003), "involves redressive action that 'gives face' to the address", but it may "result in the apologizer losing face" (p.36). Thus, when Joy wrote to apologise for a possible offence of which she was unaware, she might have, at the same time, damaged her own face. Yet Joy's apology was made only on condition that an actual offence had occurred for which she needed to take responsibility. Thus, the most direct way of saving Joy's face was to invalidate her apology, which could be done by removing the presupposed condition. Hence, Doris began her email with an apology which explained the reason for her delayed reply. By announcing herself to be the one who was responsible for the late reply, Doris incidentally overturned Joy's presupposition of the offence.

However, even though Doris had eased Joy's mind about the offence, it was still undeniable that Doris' late reply had showed that other things had taken priority for Doris over the email correspondence. Thus, in addition to the apology, Doris gave a vivid account of her busyness. It is my interpretation that Doris' description of her hectic life could have worked to empathic effect in Joy, which may then have made Joy feel better, if she had felt neglected. Olshstain & Cohen (1983:22-3) and Blum-Kulka et al. (1989:289-294) in their project "Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP)" also find that giving objective reasons for the violation is a common politeness strategy when making an apology.

According to Brown & Levinson (1987:187), apology is a negative politeness



strategy which aims to save the hearer's negative face by redressing the impingement on the hearer. However, this view does not seem applicable in this case. In most situations, the cause of an impingement would require the doer to actively engage in the FTA. Yet in Joy and Doris' case, Doris apologised because of something she had not done soon enough: to reply to Joy's email. Hence, rather than seeing Doris' apology as a redressive act, it might make more sense to see her apology as a strategy to attend to Joy's positive face, her want to be understood and cared about. Following this track of analysis, Doris' ultimate politeness intention carried in her apology may have been to maintain friendly interaction with Joy by showing concern for Joy's face needs. In this regard, Doris' apology should be considered as a positive politeness strategy which, in Brown & Levinson's words, is to satisfy the hearer's wants to be "liked, admired, cared about, understood, listened to" (Brown & Levinson, 1987:129).

#### **5.4.5 Discussion**

In this analysis, I have discussed the pragmatic functions of speech act of apologising along with the use of greeting strategy. The apologies were investigated in relation to their contextualised factors, such as their interactive norms, the nature of the offence and the semantic meanings. It is concluded in this analysis that the functions of apologies could be dynamic and context-dependent. This point is illustrated by the following summary of Joy and Doris' analysis.

In order to apologise for a possible offence, Joy's email was composed in a more formal style with greetings and terms of address. Greetings and terms of address were not commonly used in Joy and Doris' emails. It was interpreted that this particular change in Joy's writing was meant to convey her respect and deference to Doris. Greeting denotes as Goffman suggests, "an obligation on how to conduct oneself in a

particular way toward others” (Goffman,1956). The sense of deference and the pre-apology worked together to assure Doris that Joy would not have offended Doris on purpose. Thus, Joy’s apology, rather than seeming a remedial action, was probably aimed to clarify any unintended misunderstanding and to continue her email correspondence with Doris.

In response to Joy’s email, Doris also followed similar email style of greeting to Joy with the endearment term “dear”. The use of an endearment term could be seen as a positive strategy to convey in-group membership which could set a more friendly tone for her email. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) note, “[g]reetings and farewells offer formulas to ease the strain created for face by the beginnings and ends of interactions” (p. 138). Following the greeting, Doris apologised for her delay replying. This apology gave a clear answer of the real reason for her non-response the week before. By claiming responsibility for the late email, Doris indirectly assured Joy that she had not taken offence. Seen in its overall context, Doris’ apology seemed to show more concern for her e-pal’s face than regret. In this regard, Doris’ apology should be considered as a positive politeness strategy: to attend to her e-pal’s face needs to be cared for and considered.

It was noted in this analysis that Joy and Doris’ apologies, though they carried different pragmatic functions, both aimed to transmit their good intentions to one another. Holmes also points out that “an apology is primarily and essentially a social act. It is aimed at maintaining good relations between participants (1990:156)”. In line with Holmes’ assertion, I conclude that it is possible to consider the act of an apology as an interactive strategy which aims to invite friendly interactions.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, data analysis was performed on three sets of email data. Various politeness strategies were used to convey different meanings in the context. Yet the politeness strategies performed in the three pairs seem to put more weight on the maintenance of their epals' face needs. There are three main points which appeared prominent in this chapter.

First, it was noticed that, whatever researchers assume, disagreement does not always result in conflicts. In pair 4, Eve and May, though they held different views about dieting, did not express their different opinions in an intrusive way. On the contrary, despite asserting their own opinions, they also rationalised their epal's different opinion and expressed their understanding of it. As a result, solidarity was built during the negotiations of their different views.

Secondly, empathy was expressed as a strategy to form solidarity between the interactants in pair 5. Code-switching was used in the interactions to show alliance. Some of the strategies used seem to conform to what researchers have suggested about how gender would influence the choices of politeness strategies. However, I argue that it was the other contextual factors, such as the norms of interactions, the topics and the modality of the interactions which made the gender element more salient. Thus, the correlation of gender identity with politeness strategies should not be seen as a stable theoretical construct.

Finally, both interactants in pair 6 apologised but the functions of the apologies were different. Joy's apology aimed to show her sincerity in not wanting to offend Doris and Doris' apology was meant to take full responsibility for her late reply, which then would release Joy from worrying about her possible offensive questions. It could be seen that both apologies, though they carried different pragmatic functions,

both show great concern for their epals' faces. It once again points out that in order to retain full understanding of the speech act meaning, one needs to interpret the speech act in relation to its context.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Data Analysis III**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 6, three analyses are presented in turn in 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4. In 6.5, an overall conclusion is presented based on the discussion in each analysis. In 6.2, the participant shares a near accident experience with her epal. Her epal then shows concern for her in their own intimate form of interactions. In 6.3, I present a communicative event in which a political topic was brought up but it was only slightly touched on by the other person to avoid possible disagreement. Lastly in 6.4, the participant apologised to his epal for writing a long email since his epal had not replied so far. He reckoned that his email, which was too long, may have been burdensome to his epal. The three analyses show that both the interactants' faces are maintained in the interactions.

#### **6.2 Pair 7 – A near accident**

##### **6.2.1 Participants' profiles**

###### **Peter**

Peter, a 34-year-old information technology worker, liked to learn about Chinese culture, language and history. He was a British-born Chinese who could speak and write only in English. He had been to China and had a few Chinese friends. Peter was a quiet person who liked to spend time at home reading or using the computer. By joining this programme, he was hoping to make new friends.

###### **Penny**

Penny, a 25-year-old Taiwanese female, was a high school English teacher. She was an English major who had studied English for 12 years. Penny described herself

as a not very outgoing woman but she liked to make new friends. She also considered herself to be good at comforting friends and giving emotional support. Penny had had a Korean penpal when she was in high school and she had greatly enjoyed learning about Korea's culture and language from their exchanges by letter. This was also the reason why she was interested in joining this intercultural communication project.

### 6.2.2 Communicative event

Peter and Penny wrote to each other almost every day or every other day from the beginning of the project. I received a total of 98 emails from them during the 12 weeks. The average number of the emails from both sides per week was 8. Since they wrote so frequently, they shared many of the details of their daily lives. They wrote about work, friends, families, relationships and even astrology. As a result of their frequent email exchanges, they had come to know one another pretty well by the week when this communicative event took place. The emails below were extracted from week 6. In this communicative event, Penny wrote to Peter about a near accident which she had had. In Peter's response to Penny's email, he expressed his concern. Through analysis, I attempt to show how close rapport was developed and maintained in the email interactions of this pair.

#### Extract Q. Week 6 Penny to Peter

32	Actually, I feel grateful now because I am still alive. Last
33	Saturday, we the whole family helped my brother move in his dorm,
34	which is far away from my home. My brother drove the car and because
35	he is an inexperienced driver, we almost bump into a huge wagon when
36	he tried to change the lane on the highway. I thought I was
37	defiinitely dead at that time, but fortunately the wagon driver
38	shunned our car quickly. I am so happy that I can still write email
39	to you now.
40	So please read my each email carefully because each of them is so
41	precious. 哈哈
42	Take care and have a nice week. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Extract R. Week 6 Peter to Penny

19	I am glad you have gotten over your 'near accident' with the wagon and
20	can still email me. I think Sharon would be very upset as she would lose
21	an important person in her experiment\project ... 哈哈. (Just teasing
22	you). Seriously I am glad you are ok. Sometime things like that really does
23	cause you to think and evaluate your life and also makes you think how
24	short life can be and can make you think what you really want in life.
	***
35	Excuse my grammer or vocabulary if I have written anything incorrectly
36	or spelt anything wrong. Just I am late for work and will also be late
37	home tonight but wanted to reply to you before I go.
38	Hope you have a lovely day and chat to you soon.

(\*\*\* sentences are omitted in-between)

### **6.2.3 Analysis of Penny's email**

#### **6.2.3.1 Penny's speech act analysis**

As mentioned previously, Penny and Peter wrote to each other very often after the first week. Sharing their daily lives with one another had become a routine for them. In this email correspondence, Penny gave a narrative of her near accident in a car. Along with the story, she also stated her feelings about the experience.

The main kind of speech act that she used to express her feelings and her experience was the expressive speech act. Penny began the paragraph with a statement: "Actually, I feel grateful now because I am still alive". Since the statement was confusing without further explanations, the statement may have been used as an opening statement to draw Peter's attention to the story that followed. After initiating the topic, Penny vividly described how the near accident occurred, due to her brother's inexperienced driving (see line 32-38). Then she rephrased what she had stated in the opening line about how lucky she was to have escaped an accident. Urban (1994) argues that through the use of paraphrase or gloss, "meaning circulates or is communicated despite the difference in surface form" (p.147). Tannen (1989:54) also maintains that the forms of repetition can range from "exact repetition (the same

words uttered in the same rhythmic pattern) to paraphrase (similar ideas in different words). Agreeing with both Tannen and Urban's assertions, I also interpret that the meaning of the two sentences was repeated even though Penny did not use the exact lexicons and phrases. In line 32, Penny wrote 'Actually, I feel grateful now because I am still alive.' And in line 38, she repeated again, 'I am so happy that I can still write email to you now'. It was not difficult to see that both of the sentences meant that Penny was glad to have escaped an accident. Semantically, the two sentences repeat one another.

In terms of the forms of repetition, Norrick (1988) proposes that the functions of repetition should be categorised as 'second-speaker repetition', meaning the second speaker repeats what he/she has heard. Repetition usually aims to acknowledge, concur, accept a formulation, express surprise or disbelief, match claim, contradict, correct, think aloud, play on a phrase for humour; and 'same-speaker repetition' has the functions of holding the floor, bridging an interruption, ensuring exact precise understanding, increasing coherence, repeating with stress and repeating with expansion. On the basis of Norrick's view, Penny's email contains 'same-speaker repetition. The repetition in Penny's case may function to a) increase coherence and; b) stress her mood.

a. To increase coherence:

The two repeated sentences were placed at the beginning and at the end of the paragraph. Since the main near-accident story was given in between the two repeated sentences, it could be inferred that the first sentence was to indicate the beginning of the story and the second sentence was to signify the end of it. Similarly, Tannen (1989) also suggests that repetition could function to establish coherence.



b. To stress the mood:

Beyond doubt, Penny's near-accident experience must have been very frightening. Yet, rather than complaining about the unpleasant experience, Penny seemed grateful and happy for being safe and sound. Her first sentence (line 32) indicated her gratefulness to be alive and her repeated sentence (lines 38-39) showed her happiness in being able to write the email. Both 'grateful' (line 32) and 'happy' (line 38) are adjectives to describe emotions. According to Searle's speech act taxonomy, the expression of feelings or emotions on a psychological state is categorized as an expressive speech act. It reflects affective reactions to a situation (see Searle, 1969; 1979). The intensifier "so" was used to strengthen the emotional state "happy" in line 38.

As discussed above, Penny's repeated sentences revealed her feelings regarding the near-accident. Thus, the expressed emotions revealed Penny's feeling toward the whole experience. Thus, in my interpretation, the two expressive sentences and the narrative were closely related. On the one hand, by stating her own feelings, Penny had given the narrative of the near-accident a more personal touch. On the other, the narrative presented her feelings.

Following this paragraph, Penny made a joke and concluded that since she was so near to the accident, Peter should cherish her email more (line 40). She wrote, 'So please read my each email carefully because each of them is so precious. 哈哈 (ha ha ha )' (the Chinese pronunciation in the bracket is mine). This sentence, though appearing to be a directive speech act at first glance, could work as an intensifier for the previous expressive sentence. This inference is drawn on the basis of the following considerations:

First, the sentence began with a conjunction 'so' to indicate its close relation

with something which has been written previously. Without knowing what had been said previously, the sentence (line 40) could not be fully understood. Thus, if seen with the previous sentences, the final sentence clearly means that Penny was asking Peter to read her emails carefully because she had just escaped from a possible life-threatening accident.

Second, it could be discerned from the written-out laughter at the end of the sentence that Penny intended the statement to be a joke. Since the statement seemed more like a joke than a request, it was necessary to explore the meaning of the sentence from its context. Thus, in order to better understand Penny's communicative intent in this sentence (line 40), the prior sentence should also be considered. In the preceding sentence (line 38), Penny expressed her happiness at escaping the near-accident and being able to write to Peter. Following this, Penny wrote that Peter should cherish her emails. Both of the sentences seemed to refer to the same thing, namely, the near-accident. In short, the two sentences were, in fact, aiming to stress further her near-accident experience.

Concluding from the above two points, it seems safe to suggest that line 41 should not be considered a literal request to her e-pal, but as a humorous reinforcement of what she had described previously. Since the sentence's linguistic meaning did not correspond with Penny's intended communicative meaning, my interpretation of line 40 is that it was meant to be read as a humorous remark. In what follows, I turn to the politeness implications carried with the notion of 'humour'.

#### **6.2.3.2 Penny's (im)politeness analysis**

Having looked at the speech act in Penny's email, I next look at the politeness features which went hand in hand with the expressive act. In this section, I discuss

how intimacy and rapport were transmitted through Penny's comment on her near-accident.

As discussed above, Penny added expressive speech acts to her narrative of the near-accident so her story would sound more affective. Although it was an unpleasant experience, Penny exhibited a sanguine attitude. Her attitude could be inferred from two things: 1) she used positive adjectives, such as 'grateful'/'happy' to describe her feelings; and 2) she added a little humour at the end of the narrative. The two points are discussed above in terms of the part they play in transmitting emotions in expressive speech acts. In this section, I attempt to show how Penny's descriptions of her mood toward the near-accident could have a) developed rapport and; b) built intimacy and solidarity with Peter.

a. Develop rapport:

The arrangement of the sentences in the passage demonstrated Penny's intention of boosting Peter's status by showing that he was important to her.

Penny's first sentence (line 32) was to express her gratitude for being alive and her last sentence (line 38) her happiness for being for being safe so she can write to Peter. As discussed in the previous section, the last sentence, which expressed similar meaning to that of her first sentence, could be seen as an intensifier for it. Although it was very likely that Penny was probably utterly happy to be able to do anything, having escaped harm from the near-accident, she chose to say that she was happy because she could still write an email to Peter. To flatter Peter by showing how she valued their email correspondence, Penny revealed her desire to develop close rapport with Peter.

b. Build intimacy and solidarity

Penny's narrative also attempted to build solidarity between her and Peter. This inference was drawn from the two observations based on the sentence, "So please read my each email carefully because each of them is so precious. 哈哈" (lines 40,41). It is conjectured that Penny intended to use humour to create intimacy.

Norrick (1993:2) points out that most conversational joking grows from preceding talk. Penny's joke was no exception. Her joke about how Peter should treasure her email was made straight after Penny expressed her happiness at being able to write to Peter (lines 38-41). Penny's joke, when seen together with her prior sentence, seemed to presuppose how much she valued Peter's friendship; Peter should also consider her a close friend. Brown & Levinson (1987) suggest that jokes are used by the speaker as a positive politeness strategy to assert common ground with the hearer. It is Brown & Levinson's view that "jokes may be used to stress that shared background or those shared values" (1987:124). Their view on jokes had revealed an important element in making a joke, which is the closeness of a relationship. Before one can share values with another person, one must get to know another person to a certain degree.

Penny expressed a similar view on making jokes in her e-interview. She wrote, "we became more and more familiar with each other, which enabled us to tease each other or say something funny and nonsense" (Penny's 1<sup>st</sup> e-interview). From this reflection, it can be confirmed that her joke was made on the basis of her evaluation of their relationship and her belief that they had similar feelings for one another. Furthermore, she added that, "If my memory doesn't fail me, it is Peter who started to tease me and then I teased him back". She then commented that she imitated Peter's communicative style because she felt that "it makes us feel closer to each other. Once

I can speak in Peter's way, he may accept me easier''(3<sup>rd</sup> interview). Penny's reflections could support my view about the use of jokes as a strategy to increase the intimacy between Penny and Peter.

Also, it was noted that Penny could also vary the use of languages to extend solidarity. As seen in line 41, the written-out laughter (哈哈) in Chinese character was added at the end of the sentence. Laughter, as discussed in pair 3, was frequently used in email interaction to signify the emotional state of the writer in order to make up for the missing paralinguistic cues found in face-to-face interactions. Following this train of thought, the laughter in Penny's email would have been intended to highlight the humorous intent of her statement. However, it was noticed that the imitation of laughter was written in Chinese characters.

The switch of languages in this case appeared to be based on their mutual understanding from the past interactions. Peter was very keen on reading and writing in Chinese. He had expressed his interest in Chinese language since the first week. He wrote, 'If you have some time. I would like you to write part of your email in chinese. I will use a dictionary to translate.' Since then, Penny would sometimes write parts of her emails in Chinese and Peter would reply with some Chinese as well. An example could be seen on their week 2 email correspondence. Peter wrote, 'For your definition in chinese I have but one word for it. Karma “羯磨磨” (jie mo mo). I do not know if that is the correct translation as I am using a dictionary so apologies if it is wrong.' Penny replied, 'And we don't say “羯磨磨” (jie mo mo) in Chinese. Actually, it's foreign to me. I think we call the reincarnation “輪迴” (lun hui)' (the Chinese pronunciation in the bracket is mine). The example demonstrates that code-switching was not new to Peter and Penny.

Taking this view into the analysis of the written-out laughter in Chinese character,

it could be conjectured that the switch of languages was a sign to show their tacit understanding. By writing the laughter in Chinese characters, not only did Penny display the humorous intent of the sentence; she also allied herself with Peter's interest in using Chinese words and therefore created greater solidarity between them.

## **6.2.4 Analysis of Peter's email**

### **6.2.4.1 Peter's speech act analysis**

In this section, I look at Peter's response to Penny's narrative of the near-accident. His response was mainly structured upon the expressive speech act.

In line 19, Peter stated 'I am glad you have gotten over your 'near accident' with the wagon and can still email me'. This sentence appeared to resemble what Penny had written in her email about being grateful to be alive and glad that she could still write emails to Peter. Looking at its syntactic structure, the sentence could be segmented into two parts: Peter's comment (I am glad) and the rephrase of Penny's words ('you have gotten over your "near accident" with the wagon and can still email me'). It could be seen from these two segments that Peter expressed his attitude to what Penny had previously described in her email. The combined use of the expressive speech act with the repeated statement was not only to show his concern with regard to Penny's experience, but also to signify the beginning of the topic. Peter did not comment on Penny's near accident experience until line 19. What was written before line 19 is irrelevant to this topic. Thus, it was conjectured that the employed expressive speech act here could also function as a way of changing the topic.

After shifting the topic to Penny's near accident experience, Peter made a joke to imply that it would have been bad if this project had lost her as a participant (lines

20-22). The joke, though appearing at first glance to be an expressive speech act, was not meant to be taken as Peter's real opinion. A bracket was used after the joke to point out that it was written in jest. The joke, which was not semantically used to express Peter's feelings, will be discussed further in the politeness section for its pragmatic functions in his email.

Following the joke, Peter added 'Seriously I am glad you are ok.' The adverb 'seriously' was used to stress the sincerity of the statement and also to reiterate the joking purpose of the previous sentence. It is notable that this sentence was an exact clause repetition (I am glad) of his first sentence of this passage (line 19). The repetition of the first sentence at the end of the passage created coherence in his main argument, his happiness at knowing that Penny was safe. In this sense, it could be concluded that the repetition was to emphasise Peter's intention to express his happiness at knowing that she was unharmed.

#### **6.2.4.2 Peter's (im)politeness analysis**

As discussed above, Peter's reply employed the expressive speech act to show that he was glad to hear that Penny was safe. Since Penny made a joke about her near accident experience, in Peter's response, Peter decided to play with her joke and make a joke on what she had said. The prime purpose of this section is to examine the politeness intentions carried in Peter's joke on Penny's near-accident narrative. In my interpretation, Peter's joke was intended to consolidate intimacy with Penny. This interpretation was inferred from two aspects of Peter's joke.

##### **a. Using jokes to signify camaraderie**

Norrick (1994) discussed in his article "Repetition as a joking strategy" the idea

that exact repetitions or repetitions with slight variation are frequently used in conversation to create humour and jokes. The repetition in this email set began when Penny made a humorous remark about how Peter should cherish her email because of what had nearly happened to her. As discussed in Peter's speech act analysis, not only did Peter repeat some of Penny's words, he further expanded on Penny's joke and said that "I think Sharon would be very upset as she would lose an important person in her experiment\project ... 哈哈" (lines 20,21).

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), a joke is often used by the speaker as a basic positive politeness technique to stress mutually shared knowledge or values with the hearer. Although some researchers have argued that jokes can sometimes be used as a negative politeness strategy or may even be face-threatening (Holmes, 2000), it did not appear to be so in Peter's case. This inference could be confirmed by seeing Penny's response to Peter's joke. She wrote, 'I will take care of myself and please take care of yourself for Sharon, ok? 哈哈 (Just teasing you back...)' (Penny's week 6 email). Rather than consider Peter's joke offensive, Penny appeared to be delighted at Peter's response. She decided to play along and made a similar joke about Peter in her reply. From Penny's reaction, it could be conjectured that Peter's banter was interpreted as a friendly gesture, for two reasons: 1) Peter's banter was developed from Penny's own joke. By carrying on Penny's joke, Peter had shown his attention and interest in Penny's email; and 2) Despite the joke, Peter still revealed his concern for Penny afterwards. The shift of tones had further accentuated the sincerity of Peter's concern.

Judging from Penny's 'tease back' reply, Peter's joke was interpreted as a hint inviting a more intimate and friendly interaction by Penny. Naturally, Peter was amused by Penny's response. He responded, "'Just seems nice that we can tease and



have fun with each other :) 哈哈' ( Peter's week 6 email). Leech proposes that banter can foster social intimacy (Leech, 1983). Agreeing with Leech's view, I argue that the joke which circulated between Peter and Penny strengthened their relationship. Norrick (1994) also points out that "conversationalists actively engage in joking to render interaction more pleasant and conducive to solidarity" (p.26). The discussion above also suggests that Peter's joke, which followed Penny's humorous remark on her near accident, was intended to build up rapport with Penny.

b. Code-switching as a mutually recognised routine

Another politeness move in Peter's joke was the use of code-switching. Peter, like Penny, also switched and wrote his laughter in Chinese characters. Brown & Levinson suggest that the code-switching as a positive politeness strategy to create in-group identity. Code-switching, by their definition, "involves any switch from one language or dialect to another in communities where the linguistic repertoire includes two or more such codes" (1987:110). In Peter and Penny's case, their regular code-switching was between English and Chinese. Since code-switching was their mutually recognized interactive routine, Penny adopted it to show their intimacy. Acknowledging Penny's intention, not only did Peter imitate Penny's writing, he also added the laughter in Chinese characters at the end of his joke. By involving himself in this code-switching interactive routine, Peter confirmed his close relationship with Penny and therefore enhanced camaraderie with Penny

On the above basis, it seems safe to conclude that Peter's primary goal in his joke was to further consolidate the relationship between them.

### 6.2.5 Discussion

This analysis has shed some light on how jokes can be used to develop close relationships between interlocutors. It has been concluded that, by telling jokes, not only did the participants create a pleasant atmosphere in their interactions, but also further confirmed their close relationship to one another. During the analysis, it has been noticed that the repetitions occurred in both Penny and Peter's jokes. Penny repeated her own sentence (same-speaker repetition) whereas Peter repeated Penny's words (second-speaker repetition) (see Norrick, 1988). Even though one is "second-speaker repetition" and the other is "same speaker repetition", they all aimed to develop rapport. Furthermore, code-switching between English and Chinese took place in both Penny and Peter's emails. It was concluded that by adopting this mutually recognized interactive routine, they both wished to create intimacy and reinforce solidarity.

During the discussion of this data set, I note that there are two more issues to explore: a. the virtual personas; b. the meanings of smiley face and written-out laughter

a. To begin with, both Penny and Peter in their pre-survey questionnaire described themselves as shy and quiet. However, judging from the average numbers of emails they wrote to one another in a week, they were considered to be the most active pair among all the participants in this project. In addition, after they had emailed each other for a while, they exchanged photos and discussed the possibility of talking online. Penny ascribed her change to the nature of online communication. She wrote, "since it is a virtual environment and Peter won't come to Taiwan in the last three months, I was just quite frank about everything (1<sup>st</sup> interview)". She considered that this asynchronous form of online communication had helped her

organize her thoughts and say what she really wished to say. She stated, “email communication helped me to express my true feelings.”

Penny’s point seemed to echo what I discussed earlier (Chapter 2) about the fluidity of virtual communication. I argued there that in online communication, the fewer constraints on social and cultural expectations and distraction from the speakers’ identities have granted interactants more liberty in constructing their virtual-self. Hine (2000) points out that in the virtual world “[t]here is no guarantee that the identity performances seen in cyberspace will mirror those performed in offline settings” (p.118). Turkle also notes that cyberspace allows people to try out new identities or express aspects of identity suppressed in offline life (Turkle, 1995; 1996). In line with Turkle’s assertion, I hold that it might be possible for people who do not talk much in face-to-face interaction to reveal more of their thoughts in online communication. Unlike face-to-face communication in which interactants feel bound to make instant responses, online communication allows interactants to have more freedom to decide when and how they want to make a response. Thus, in Penny and Peter’s case, online communication may have provided a less intimidating social environment for them to talk more freely.

b. The meanings of the emoticons “smiley face” and “written-out laughter”

It was noticeable that smiley faces and laughter were frequently used in this pair’s email correspondence. Smiley face, which is an alternative way of reproducing the metacommunicative features of face-to-face communication, is usually considered to have a similar meaning to written-out laughter. Researchers have suggested that, in face-to-face communication, smiley faces and laughter converge functionally as non-verbal expressions of humour appreciation (cf. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970; van Hooff,

1972). This view seems to apply to many online communication studies, which often cite emoticons and laughter as an important signal for conveying humour in computer-mediated contexts (cf. Godin, 1993; Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998). Yet there still may be a subtle difference between the emoticons and the written-out laughter which leads the writer to prefer one to another in some situations. For instance, Peter once added a smiley face next to his final salutation “Have a nice week :)” (week 6). It would be odd in this case, if he had added written-out laughter, which might have rendered his original wish ironic. An example of written-out laughter could be seen in Peter’s week 8 email, “As for your thoughts on bfs and Horror films ... 哈哈I will think there is a reason why your bf will want to take you to a scary\horror movie.” In this sentence, Peter was apparently trying to make fun of Penny by suggesting that her boyfriend deliberately took her to a horror movie for a purpose. In order to make sure she knows that it was meant to be a joke, he added written-out laughter. If a smiley had been used in this sentence instead of the laughter, it might have made the statement sound more serious and less humorous. In both of the examples, I have shown that there is a slight difference between the uses of smiley face and of written-out laughter. However, I cannot make generalizations from the present examples as the usage of emoticons and written-out laughter may be subject to change with different people in different contexts. I have raised this issue here because the pragmatic use of the two paralinguistic cues in online communication has not, to my knowledge, been distinguished and discussed yet. Nowadays, with more and more people using these features in online communication, I propose that they should be given more research attention.

## **6.3 Pair 8- Avoiding political topics**

### **6.3.1 Participants' profiles**

#### Calvin

Calvin was a 19-year-old British student reading Health Studies and Travel/Tourism. Calvin was very interested in learning the Chinese language and culture. As his girlfriend was Chinese, he usually visited her parents in China every year. He had been learning Chinese for two years.

#### Nelson

Nelson was a 24-year-old Taiwanese man. He had just started working when he joined the project, having graduated from an Applied English department. He liked making new friends from other countries and always enjoyed cultural exchanges with foreign friends.

### **6.3.2 Communicative event**

Calvin and Nelson were invited to join this project by a common friend but they did not know each other beforehand. Sharing a common friend seemed to bring them closer rather quickly. During the time of these email exchanges, Taiwan was facing a major crisis. The first family in Taiwan was drawn into a corruption scandal. Tens of thousands of Taiwanese people campaigned on the streets for the President to step down. Since it was the biggest event in Taiwan at that time, most of the Taiwanese participants in this project raised the topic in their emails. Nelson was no exception. While the emails seemed to focus on the scandal of Taiwan's President, the event was spoken of on the premise that Taiwan is independent from Mainland China. Taiwan's sovereignty has long been a sensitive issue. Thus Nelson raised the topic with caution. It was later confirmed in his e-interview that he was being careful in his words

because he was aware that Calvin's girlfriend was from Mainland China and he did not want Calvin to feel uncomfortable about it.

Thus, Nelson only touched on this political issue lightly without giving his personal views on the issue. Calvin also did not comment on this issue but expressed an interest in learning more about it. This email exchange showed how a political topic was brought up and how the receiver responded. Nelson initiated the topic of Taiwan's politics, as this is a topic which all Taiwanese were discussing vociferously at the time. He brought it up three times. In the previous week, Nelson had written, "Now people in Taiwan is ready to provoke our president, it's really a shame for all of Taiwanese." Following this, Nelson reverted to the same event. "our president ran away to other country by the air force. Lots of people in Taiwan can't wait drawing him down from his stage." This email was the last time Nelson raised the topic and it was also the only time when Calvin responded to it.

The email extracts are displayed below. I show only the parts which are closely related to the communicative event under scrutiny.

Extract S: Week 5 Nelson to Calvin

2	i rode my motorcycle to take the bus in a super heavy rain this morning .
3	although it's handful, i think it's interesting to rode in this way.
4	there is a big event that will be happening in taipei tomorrow..named "a-bian
5	step down". Millions of people will get together to express their thoughts.
6	they held a international press conference yesterday..maybe you will watch
7	it on BBC. 70% of taiwanese people do want him get out of the presidential
8	palace.^^
9	Do you watch tennis ? i watched some US. OPEN live matches on tv these
10	days. i am looking forward to watching "maria sarapova" and "martina
11	hingis's" match..maybe it's on this weekend.
	***
17	sincerely your mate,
18	Nelson

(\*\*\* sentences are omitted in-between)

#### Extract T: Week5 Calvin to Nelson

1	Hello Nelson...I've always wanted a Motorcycle but my parents have never
2	Let me have one as they say they are dangerous. What your plan this
3	weekend? Do you get both days off on the Weekend? I didn't know about
4	the big event in taiwan but will look up the outcome on the BBC website as
5	i'm very interested about people's views about the Taiwanese president.
6	Today was so busy and tiring... this weekend i must work but i'm thinking of
7	giving up my part-time job as it's to much stress as we are short staffed. I
8	want to find another part-time job in a clothes shop where atmosphere
9	should be more peaceful and less people, also i may be able to get discount
10	on the clothes to...haha! :)
	***
18	I hope you have a wonderful weekend and i hope you have fun on your
19	day's off work!
20	Cheers mate and will go and cook something to eat....i'm hungry and could
21	eat a horse right now if i had one....haha! 😊

(\*\*\* intervening sentences are omitted)

In extract S, Nelson gave Calvin an update on the President's scandal and implicitly revealed his stance on this event. Calvin responded briefly to this topic in extract T. How did the participants get into and out of the political topic without causing tension is discussed in terms of the speech acts used in the context and the (im)politeness strategies embedded in the acts.

### **6.3.3 Analysis of Nelson's email**

#### **6.3.3.1 Nelson's Speech act analysis**

The section will discuss the speech acts used in achieving Nelson's communicative purpose of expressing his views on this political event without stating them overtly. There are two main speech acts in Nelson's email: the first was a speech act of expression (see Searle, 1979).

there is a big event that will be happening in taipei tomorrow..named "a-bian step down". Millions of people will get together to express their thoughts. they held a international press conference yesterday..maybe you will watch it on BBC. 70% of taiwanese people do want him get out of the presidential palace.^^
---

(Lines 4- 8)

First Nelson wrote about the big demonstration in reaction to the presidential scandal. Then he made a reference to the BBC news. Even though the subject 'I' was not stated in these sentences, Nelson's attitude to this event can still be inferred.

The act of expressing opinions and attitudes is called 'expressive' (see Searle, 1985). How Nelson indirectly expressed his views is discussed below. In Line 7, Nelson stated:

70% of Taiwanese people do want him get out of the presidential 8 palace.^^ (Lines 7 & 8)
--

As discussed previously, the 'politics of Taiwan' might be a risky topic. Thus, the safer form of presenting the topic is to display the news without involving personal feelings and views. By showing the information as a majority opinion, Nelson distances himself from it. Thus, he delivered the news without overtly expressing his own viewpoint. As Searle (1985, p.30) puts it, 'the speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more' or he 'means something else' (p. 31). In this case, it is conjectured that this statement was meant to convey not just general public opinions, but also Nelson's views regarding this event.

Nelson used 'do' to stress on the importance of the latter point: 'want him get out of the presidential palace'. He also added a smiley emoticon to the end of the sentence to signify his mood, meaning his approval of this statement. Nelson confirmed in his e-interview that he regarded the use of emoticons as facilitative: "it really help expressed my inner mind." Besides using the smiley face to show his feelings, I would suggest that the emoticon carried another function in this context. Since emoticons are normally used in informal situations to indicate the writer's feelings, it can also be conjectured that Nelson added it in order to show that rather than a serious discussion, this was a casual sharing of information.



### 6.3.3.2 Nelson's (im)politeness analysis

The politeness strategies are discussed in terms of their functions in the context. In the email, Nelson reported the latest development on the President's scandal. It is speculated that Nelson mentioned the news three times because he may have wish to expand on the topic if Calvin also showed interest. Since Calvin had not made any comments on this political event before, Nelson did not know how Calvin felt about this event and therefore Nelson was choosing his words carefully when expressing his opinions. Some politeness strategies were applied in the context.

#### a. Safe topic

In this communicative event, Nelson brought up the topic of Taiwan's politics. Nelson mentioned in his e-interview that he avoided some political topics, such as "union of china", but he mentioned "taiwan's differences from China, cuz Calvin had never been to Taiwan." In his statement, Nelson highlighted 'the union of china' among the political topics because of the historical background of Mainland China in relation to Taiwan. There is a long-term diplomatic conflict between Mainland China and Taiwan regarding the subject of 'Taiwan's independence'. This controversial issue has raised arguments, both nationally and internationally.

Thus, on the one hand Nelson wished to share the things happening in his life with Calvin but, on the other, he did not wish to spotlight some political topics. Nelson avoided too much attention being paid to political topic by providing other safe topics. The inclusion of other topics, i.e. sport, gave Calvin alternatives for switching focus if he wished. Safe topics could be located before and after addressing the news. In lines 2-3, Nelson wrote about what he had done that day. In lines 9-11, a sports event was noted. These topics were not potentially face-threatening and thus

safe. Brown & Levinson note that in order to satisfy the hearer's want to be correct, the speaker can choose topics that are easier for both to agree upon (1987:112) They also suggest that, in many cultures, safe topics are often aired before performing an FTA. In this case, Nelson placed the seemingly more risky political topic in between two safer topics. The arrangement gave the impression that Nelson was talking only about general things which happened in his life and that he placed equal weight on all three topics. As a result, the degree of possible face-threatening by bringing up politics again was mitigated.

#### b. Avoidance of using 'I'

The discussion about politics could easily lead to aggressive argument or excessive talk. Thus, the avoidance of having 'I' as the only subject in making the statement could save the email from being too direct. In lines 5 & 6, Nelson stated, "millions of people will get together to express their thoughts. they held a international press conference yesterday.." Then he added, "70% of taiwanese people do want him get out of the presidential palace.^^" (lines 7-8) The pluralization of the subject makes the statement seems not only representative but also objective. By blurring his stance, Nelson might have prevented the possible danger of provoking personal conflicts. Even though he deliberately excluded himself from the statements, Nelson's political stance can still be identified from the side of the story he chose to tell and the clues he left with Calvin.

### **6.3.4 Analysis of Calvin's email**

#### **6.3.4.1 Calvin's speech act analysis**

Acknowledging Nelson's intention of sharing his feelings about the political

event and at the same time keeping their interaction pleasant by not paying full attention to the topic, Calvin made a short comment about this event and moved on to other topics.

In Calvin's reply, a speech act of expression was employed to show his interest in the event which Nelson had brought up. Calvin answered Nelson's wishes in bringing this political event into their email exchanges and briefly expressed his intention to find more information about the news (lines 3-5).

Calvin wrote, "I didn't know about the big event in taiwan but will look up the outcome on the BBC website as i'm very interested about people's views about the Taiwanese president" (lines 3-5). As seen in Calvin's sentence, three tenses were used in one sentence. Researchers have developed a view of treating tenses as speech act functions which can help clarify the influence of tenses on the interpretation of events in discourse (cf. Asher, 1993; Kamp & Reyle, 1993; Asher & Lascarides, 2001). Calvin's sentence seems to exemplify the views of these researchers.

In Calvin's sentence, he first used past tense to describe his ignorance of the event. Then he used future tense to indicate his intentions of looking into the event and present tense to explain his motivation for doing so. Past tense 'didn't', future tense 'will' and present tense '(a)m' were used in the sentence for different purposes. The meanings of the three tenses are interpreted below:

- a. Past tense: The past tense in that part of the sentence is to describe a simple fact before Nelson brought the news to his attention.
- b. Future tense: By Nelson's email, Calvin was made aware of the event. He had not yet searched the news on BBC but said that he would look into the result of the event sometime in the future.

- c. Present tense: The decision to follow up the news was made because of Calvin's personal interest. To reveal that as a general truth, he uses simple present tense.

The interplay of the three tenses in the structure made the situation in the context more comprehensible. The clear distinctions between the messages carried by the three tenses allowed the politeness goals to be more effectively attained. Their politeness implicatures are discussed further below.

#### **6.3.4.2 Calvin's (im)politeness analysis**

Searle (1969,1976) declares that a speech act should be further investigated from the meanings entailed from the utterance – propositional meaning and illocutionary meaning. The propositional meaning refers to the literal meaning of the utterance, whereas the illocutionary meaning is in the moves made by the hearer as a result of the utterance. The propositional meaning from Nelson's email was discussed above. In this section, I want to discuss the illocutionary meaning of Nelson's directive act from the way in the way in which Calvin responds to it. As mentioned previously, Nelson's talk about this political event was based on the belief in Taiwan as a sovereign nation. This notion radically conflicts with Calvin's view. Calvin stated in his e-interview that he believed "Taiwan is part of China". Thus he tried not to talk about politics with Nelson because he did not wish to offend Nelson. He wished to attend Nelson's positive face want, but at the same time, tried to avoid getting into deep discussion. These two quite contradictory goals were both accomplished by the strategies used in the context. Calvin, though complying with Nelson's desire for him to discover more about the news, did not state his personal views or expand on the topic.

Acknowledging Nelson's intention to bring the political issue into the discussion,

Calvin stated that he wished to find more about the news from BBC sources. He said, “I didn’t know about the big event in taiwan but will look up the outcome on the BBC website...” (lines3 &4) In this statement, Calvin explained that he wished to look into this event also out of interest. His explanation could be considered a friendly gesture as he indirectly showed that he was interested in a topic which Nelson had brought up. In order to stress on his interest, Calvin used the intensifier ‘very’ in the sentence. Brown & Levinson explain that the interest is often shown with “exaggerated intonation, stress and other aspects of prosodics, as well as with intensifying modifiers...” (p.104). Since this is a written communication, he uses the word intensifier to signify an intonation change in order to stress the sincerity of his interest in this news. In doing so, Calvin may have been indirectly giving credit to Nelson for bringing the news to his attention by indicating his ignorance of this event but also his interest in it.

### **6.3.5 Discussion**

In this communicative event, Nelson brought up a political event in Taiwan. For the first pair (Keith/Ed), the topic of politics resulted in communication breakdown. However, a similar topic interchange did not damage the relationship between Calvin and Nelson. That is because both were careful about not revealing too much of their personal opinions about the political event. “I will always believe that Taiwan is China and no matter if I express this view to Nelson or not it won’t do any favours for our friendship.” (Calvin’s e-interview) Thus, in order to maintain their good relationship, both the interactants indicated their friendliness to one another in their emails. First of all, they highlighted their friendship with the form of address. Nelson reinforced his good intentions of sharing news by consolidating his position as a good

friend to Calvin – ‘sincerely your mate’ (Nelson’s email, line 17). In return for Nelson’s goodwill, Calvin also responded to the cue for showing intimacy, ‘Cheers mate’ (Calvin’s email, line 20). Nelson felt that the word ‘mate’ had pulled “the friendship closer between us, just like brothers.” (Nelson’s e-interview). Sharing similar feelings, Calvin considered that such words as ‘buddy’ and ‘mate’ “bring a sense of friendship”. He further noted, “I would not use mate or buddy when chatting to a female in an email. Females can’t be mates they can be friends” (Calvin’s e-interview). On the basis of their comments, it is safe to make the claim here that the both of them used the word ‘mate’ in this context to strengthen the bond between them and convey comradeship.

Another in-group indicator for this pair could be identified from the use of emoticons. For instance, Nelson wrote, ‘70% of taiwanese people do want him get out of the presidential palace.^.’ (Line 8). Calvin also employed the smiley face with animated features. ‘i’m hungry and could eat a horse right now if i had one....haha! 😊’ (Calvin’s email, lines 20 & 21).

Hiltz (1986) notes that the lack of nonverbal cues in CMC could cause difficulties of interpretation. Therefore, emoticons, in addition to the function of showing emotions, can also be used as a nonverbal strategy to maintain interactional harmony by mitigating or strengthening words, e.g., “I had a big fight with my parents >\_<“. Emoticons are quite often used in virtual communication nowadays. They can be constructed of punctuation marks available on a standard keyboard, i.e. :- ) (Giese, 1998). More recently, animation features were added to the emoticons in Instant Messenger.






Smile	:-) or :)	
Cry	:'(	
Wink	;-) or ;)	
Angry	:-@ or :@	
Sad	:-( or :(	

Table 6.1:Animated emoticons (adopted from Lee et al., 2006)

These animated features add variety. Since the animation photos are not composed of punctuation marks on our keyboards, they can be used only with Instant Messenger systems and must be downloaded if needed for other purposes. Calvin suggested that the same writing style has accelerated the development of their relationship because “it makes it easy for us to understand each other” (Calvin’s e-interview). Hence, it can be concluded that the use of emoticons has become for Nelson and Calvin a norm of interaction to show friendliness and create solidarity.

## **6.4 Pair 9- Apologising for a long email**

### **6.4.1 Participants' profiles**

#### **Bill**

Bill, a 34-year-old British male, had studied Cantonese and Chinese for 1 year and Japanese for 2 years. He had friends from China and Japan and had visited China and Hong Kong before joining the project. He enjoyed learning about Asian cultures and hoped to learn more about Taiwan and Taiwanese views.

#### **Roger**

Roger, a 25-year-old male Taiwanese, had been learning English for 10 years and when he joined the project had just started learning Japanese. Although he was an English major in college, he rarely had the chances to write emails in English. He wished to practise his English writing by exchanging emails with his e-pal.

### **6.4.2 Communicative event**

Bill's enthusiasm for Asian cultures meant that he enjoyed sharing his Asian-related life experiences with Roger. The event reported here was that Bill wrote a long email describing his trip to Hong Kong and China but did not receive any feedback from his e-pal. The trip was taken not long before Bill joined this project, so he was still very excited about it and in consequence wrote an email of 1875 words to describe his trip. In this email, he mentioned that he had bumped into a very famous rock band singer – Chris Martin – and was given free tickets to one of his concerts; he gave a very vivid and detailed description of his encounter with this singer, as well as some of the other interesting events of the trip. This made it plain that Bill was very happy about his trip and wanted to share his pleasure happiness with his e-pal.



However, instead of showing interest to Bill's trip, Roger wrote no reply for a week and in his next email mentioned nothing about Bill's trip.

#### Extract U. Week3 Bill to Roger

2	how are you? i hope you are recovering from your cold now.
3	Im so sorry i have not written to you earlier this week but i have been
4	working late and just have not had the time and also i think i should
5	appologise for writing such a long long letter last time. I just get carried
6	away when i talk about my holiday, because i had such a good time! but
7	maybe it was too much, in fact you probably have not finished it yet! haha!

#### Extract V. Week4 Bill to Roger

2	how are you? sorry i have not had time to write this week, busy again i am
3	afraid.
	***
21	I will write again soon. Hope you are ok.

(\*\*\* Intervening sentences are omitted)

#### Extract W. Week5 Roger to Bill

2	Nice to hearing from you. Many thanks for your consideration, i feel
3	better now.
4	Last week , our customer who come from Japan had an important visit for 4
5	days in our company. My boss ask me to accompany with them, although i
6	couldn't speak Japanese very well . With the result that i couldn't reply to
7	you as soon as possibility. I'm so sorry about that. ^^

### **6.4.3 Bill's analysis**

#### **6.4.3.1 Bill's Speech act analysis**

As described in the communicative event, Bill was still excited about his trip and wanted to discuss it with Roger. However, in Roger's reply, he said nothing about Bill's trip. Thus, Bill was uncertain about Roger's reaction to his previous email and then apologised for its being so long. He might have done this in order either to make sure Roger had actually received the email in question, by mentioning it in an apologetic tone, or simply to apologise for its length. In order to understand Bill's real intention, I focus on the investigation of the speech act of apologising in this email.

Before going into the actual content of the email, I want to give a brief overview of the speech act of apologising.

The purpose of an apology is usually the maintenance of polite rituals and/or the acknowledgment of offences. Holmes (1990) asserts that the purpose of an apology is to restore one's relationship with the hearer by admitting one's wrongdoing. She further proposes that the speech act should fulfil three conditions:

- a) An act has occurred
- b) A believes that the act has offended B
- c) A takes responsibility for the act.

Meeting these conditions, the speech act of apologising in this email was used after Bill had written a long email regarding his trip. Bill might have suspected that Roger did not want to comment on that email because its length had annoyed him. Thus Bill apologised for writing it (see lines4-7). Bill's action seems to fit the profile of an apologetic act drawn by Holmes. Yet Stubbs (1983) points out that one can wrongly interpret a speaker's meaning; or that a speaker's real intention may not even be utterly expressed in his utterances. Therefore, it is essential to consider speech acts in their context. The analysis requires further examination for both its linguistic formula and its intended functions from within the context.

working late and just have not had the time and also i think i should appologise for writing such a long long letter last time. I just get carried away when i talk about my holiday, because i had such a good time! but maybe it was too much, in fact you probably have not finished it yet! haha!
--

(Lines4-7)

From the linguistic point of view, it is not difficult to identify the target speech act of apologising, for the key word 'apologise' occurs in line 5. Blum-Kulka et al (1989) point out that the speech act of apologising can be made on its own by expressing an apology (e.g. I'm sorry, I apologise) or applying different combinations

of semantic formulas such as providing explanation, acknowledging responsibility, repairing and giving promises (i.e. I didn't mean to do that. Will you ever forgive me? I'll do anything! etc.).

Among these apology formulas, "An expression of an apology" is considered the most direct way of expressing apology, using an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) (see Searle, 1969). IFIDs, as defined by Searle, are explicit expressions using performative verbs, such as sorry, apologize, excuse, etc. In similar vein, Aijmer, who distinguishes thirteen strategies for the explicit and implicit expression of apology, also considers apologies with performative verbs as the most explicit way of making apologies (Aijmer, 1996).

These researchers agree, then, that using the performative verb 'apologise' in a sentence is the most explicit way of expressing an apology. Accepting their view, I looked more closely at Bill's apology in the email above. In it, he divided the act of apologising into two parts: the actual apologetic statement and the reason for making the apology. The verb 'apologise' can be identified in the sentence, making the statement appear to be an apology. After making the apology, Bill went on to explain why he had done what he had. He wrote, "I just get carried away when i talk about my holiday, because i had such a good time! but maybe it was too much" (lines 5-7). Bill ascribed his long email to his enjoyment of the trip. It was noted that Bill used the phrase "carry away" to describe his state of mind when he composed the long email. 'Carry away' is normally used to describe a high and often excessive degree of emotion or enthusiasm. Hence, although the statement is literally describing his state of mind when he talks about his trip, it could in fact be giving reasons for his writing such a long email. The given reason worked together with the previous formulaic apology statement to create a complete act of apology in its full sense. Without adding

the following reason, the apologetic statement itself would have appeared strange in this context. After the discussion of a speech act of an apology, it is necessary to take the apologetic statement to another level of discussion, which is its pragmatic function in the context. This is explained further below.

Goffman (1971) considers apologies as remedial actions which aim to restore social harmony. By saying that the relationship needs to be restored, they are also suggesting that the relationship is not in a good condition. In this sense, the apology made by Bill seemed to suggest that he sensed a rupture between him and Roger. Bill wrote a journal directly after he finished the long email to Roger. He wrote, “I have just sent Roger a long email about my holiday in Hong Kong, maybe too long actually, i worry now it will be too much for him to read. I always forget that maybe he will not be used to some of the words i use or the sentence structure, i hope its ok for him” (week 2 journal). Bill was concerned that his long email might seem a little insensitive since Roger was not an English native speaker. Soon after this journal entry, Bill seemed to believe that his concern was a legitimate one because Roger did not reply to his email. Thus, following Goffman’s conceptualisation of an apology, it seems safe to suggest that Bill’s apology aimed to restore his relationship with Roger. However, since writing a long email does not usually count as a mistake which requires an apology, I suggest that the apology carries some politeness implications. The politeness aspects of the speech act are further discussed below.

#### **6.4.3.2 Bill’s (im)politeness analysis**

Although apologies, as discussed in the speech act section, aim mainly to restore harmony between the interlocutors, it should be noted that repairing is not the only function of an apology. Coulmas notes that sometimes an apology, such as ‘excuse

me', "occurs even if there was no serious or real offence as a precaution against inadvertent misconduct or unanticipated negative interpretation of one's performance" (Coulmas,1981:84). Such apologies are more ritualistic than performative. Similarly, Cohen (1996) also notes that "assigning functions to sentences is actually somewhat problematic in that the apparent sentence meaning does not necessarily coincide with the speaker's pragmatic intention" (p.384). Agreeing with both researchers, I consider that the function of an act should be considered within the context when the act occurred. Thus Bill's apology will be further discussed within its context.

This particular event occurred in the third week of their email exchanges. After writing this long email to Roger, Bill began to worry that it might present difficulties to his e-pal. Bill expressed his concerns in his weekly journal. "If we have any difficulties i think this is where they will be, me being to busy to write regularly and language difficulties" (week2 e-journal). Bill then wrote to apologise for the long email out of this concern.

Brown & Levinson (1987) categorise the act of making an apology as a negative strategy by which "the speaker can indicate his reluctance to impinge on H's negative face and thereby partially redress that impingement" (p.187). Brown & Levinson's view of an apology as a strategy to mitigate the threat caused by the speaker to the hearer could provide a possible explanation for Bill's apology. The impingement in this case is in making his e-pal read such a long email. Since Bill's e-pal did not reply, Bill felt that the length of his email may have presented some difficulties for his e-pal. In order to not put his Roger e-pal under pressure for not replying to that email, Bill then wrote, 'maybe it was too much, in fact you probably have not finished it yet! haha!' (line7). By making a little joke about his lengthy email, Bill was implying his understanding for his e-pal. The imitation of Bill's laughter ('haha!') at the end of the

sentence was to indicate that the sentence was meant to be a joke. This emotional indicator was considered important in this sentence, because it had helped form an impression of Bill's relaxed attitude toward Roger's failure to respond. Brown & Levinson (1987:124) suggest that jokes are used as a technique to "redefine the size of the FTA". According to them, joke is a positive politeness strategy, which can be used to re-rank the social distance, relative power and absolute rank of impositions. By acting as though the imposition is small, so far as the speaker is aware, the positive-politeness optimism will convince the hearer that the imposition is not great (Brown & Levinson, 1987:228). From this perspective, Bill's humour then could be a positive strategy to show that he would not be offended if Roger had not yet responded to the email.

Bill's easy attitude could have led Roger to believe that the incident was insignificant and, as a result, save Roger's face from the embarrassment at not replying to Bill's email. In addition, Bill's humour could also have worked to show his consideration for Roger's feelings. By making fun of the 'length' of the email (line7), Bill indirectly showed that he understood that the email could present some difficulties for Roger, whose first language was not English and thus reveal his consideration for Roger. Bill wrote in his e-interview, "I forgot that English is not Roger's first language and it must have been difficult for him to read. It was self-indulgent of me to write so much and maybe boring for him. I was being a holiday bore. When he did not comment on my email I just felt that he had not understood a lot of it or I had overloaded him with information and he just did not know how to respond" (Bill's e-interview). Bill's reflections on his e-interview could further support that combining his apology with a joke was meant to show his understanding of Roger failure to reply and his willingness to maintain friendly

interactions with Roger. Robinson & Smith-Lovin (2001) also find in their study that humour can help interactants maintain smooth relations by serving as a stress reducer in critical situations. In response to Bill's apology, Roger replied with another apology. This is further discussed below.

#### **6.4.4 Analysis of Roger's email**

##### **6.4.4.1 Roger's speech act analysis**

In response to Bill's emails, Roger first thanked Bill for the concern about Roger's health. Then Roger explained that because of his recent work with his firm's Japanese customers, he had not been able to reply to Bill's email sooner (see lines 4-7).

Asher & Lascarides (2001) propose that "speech acts must be understood relationally, because successfully performing them is logically dependent on the content of an antecedent utterance" (p.183). Thus, Roger's email must be discussed in relation to Bill's email. As noted above, Bill's apology aimed to show his consideration for Roger and his wish to resume their email interactions. In response to Bill's apology, Roger showed neither acceptance nor rejection of the apology. Instead of making either response, Roger avoided mentioning the long email and Bill's apology. Instead he offered an apology for not replying sooner. Roger wrote, 'I'm so sorry about that' (line7). Following an elaborated explanation of why he had been unable to write sooner, Roger gave a direct apology by using the performative word 'sorry'.

Based on Searle's speech act classifications, apologies fall into the category of expressive acts whereby a speaker expresses his/her regret to the hearer (cf. Searle, 1969). Yet Fahey (2005) points out that an apology can have different purposes,

ranging from polite rituals to the acknowledgment of an offence. That is to say, the communicative goal of the speech act should be understood within its context. Agreeing with Fahey's argument, in order to better interpret the meaning of Roger's apology, this analysis probes not only the semantic meaning of the apology but also its pragmatic functions.

Last week , our customer who come from Japan had an important visit for 4 days in our company . My boss ask me to accompany with them , although i couldn't speak Japanese very well . With the result that i couldn't reply to you as soon as possibility. I'm so sorry about that . ^^
--

(lines 4-7)

Blum-Kulka et al. find in their Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Patterns (CCSARP) project that the speech act of apologizing can take the forms of :1) An expression of an apology (use of Illocutionary Force Indicating Device); 2) An acknowledgement of responsibility; 3) An explanation or account of the situation; 4) An offer of repair; 5) A promise of forbearance (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Roger's act of apologising consisted of two parts: 1) reasons for not being able to write back earlier; 2) the actual apology statement. Roger's apology, in terms of the findings by Blum-Kulka et al., took the form of using both an IFID and providing an explanation. Roger started by describing his work the previous week. He then drew the conclusion that he had been too busy to reply sooner. In the end, Roger wrote 'I'm so sorry about that .^^'. Roger reinforced his apology by stating the reasons first is common in making an apology. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) propose that people use combined apology strategies to intensify their apology speech act. It was surmised that Roger gave the explanation because he did not want Bill to get the wrong impression that Roger was uninterested in replying to his email, in particular when Bill was sensitive about the possible effect created by his long email. Roger's account of his workload paved the way for his following apology. Explaining the reason for the delay of his reply denotes Roger's subsequent apology for its lateness.



Although the apology patterns provided by Blum-Kulka et al. are useful in looking at the linguistic and semantic meaning of Roger's apology, the patterns cannot fully explain the functions of this speech act. The apology patterns discussed in this CCSARP are based on the forms chosen by the apologisers. The discussion of apology has not been discussed from the respondent's side.

Response to emailed apologies are harder to define than apologies made in face-to-face situation, because email interaction is asynchronous. Unlike the face to face apology, where the response to an apology is usually what immediately follows from the recipient, an email apology makes its effect over time. In this regard, it is then necessary to identify the apology response from the relevancy of the content. In Roger's case, what Roger apologised for was the same as what had Bill apologised for in the previous email. Roger and Bill's apologies were highly correlated. Hence, judging from the sequence of their emails, Roger's apology should be considered as a response to Bill's apology. To my knowledge, the idea of responding to an apology with another apology has not so far been discussed in pragmatics research. Thus, in what follows, I turn next to the pragmatic functions of Roger's apology as a response.

#### **6.4.4.2 Roger's (im)politeness analysis**

Holmes (1990) points out that the act of apologising aims to address the hearer's face needs. That is to say, by taking responsibility for the offence, the speaker restores the harmony with the hearer (Holmes, 1990:159). Holmes's definition of an apology seems to suggest that an apology is made only to save the hearer's face, given that apologising is considered damaging to the speaker's face. However, I would argue that in Roger's case, his apology can be construed as a way of saving Bill's face as well as his own. Responding to an apology with another apology, the intended outcome of Roger's apology should be taken further and be considered from the

standpoint of the negotiation of face and status. This view of an apology is presented in the following politeness analysis.

a. Saving Bill's face:

Both Roger's delay and his failure to comment on a topic which Bill was obviously interested in talking about could have seemed face-threatening. Culpeper (2003:1555) points out that keeping silent or failing to act where politeness work is expected can be taken as impolite. It is possible that Bill may have felt that Roger did not reply to his email because Roger was not interested in writing to him. This might have hurt Bill's feelings. Thus by elaborating on the reasons for not being able to write back sooner, Roger was indirectly assuring Bill that his delay in replying was nothing personal. Brown & Levinson (1987:189) also state that one of the common apology strategies is to give overwhelming reasons. In which case, "S can claim that he has compelling reasons for doing the FTA (for example, his own incapacity), thereby implying that normally he wouldn't dream of infringing H's negative face" (p.189). Brown & Levinson's elucidation is helpful in understanding Roger's detailed explanation for his delayed reply. As Brown & Levinson put it, it is intended to show his unwillingness in performing the FTA.

b. Saving Roger's own face:

As discussed previously, the intention of Bill's apology, as he wrote in his e-interview, was to express his regret for making his e-pal read such a long email. Bill's apology, though out of consideration for Roger, seemed to question Roger's ability to read so much English and reply to it. Roger gave this interpretation of Bill's apology in his e-interview, writing, "In my opinion, he thought I'm not very good at

reading and writing the English mail especially he wrote the story about his trip to Asia. So he thought it would be a little bit hard for me. That's the reason why he want to apologize." From this point of view, Bill's implicit suggestion could be face-threatening to Roger's positive face, which here is the desire to be approved for his language ability. Thus, in order to save his own face, instead of responding to what Bill suggested as the reason (the lengthy email) for Roger's late reply, Roger ascribed his late reply to his heavy workload. The description of Roger in charge of the Japanese customers also highlighted his status in the workplace. Furthermore, Roger's language ability was also indirectly affirmed as he would surely have needed to use mainly English to communicate with his Japanese customers, for he had stated in the first week of their email correspondence that he had just started learning Japanese. By showing his work performance and workload, Roger had boosted his status by highlighting his successful professional image.

Seen from this perspective, Roger's apology could be seen as a polite way to save his own face while preserving his e-pal's face. By clarifying the reasons for not being able to write back sooner as his heavy workload, Roger avoided the implications about his English ability and stressed his importance at work. Although Brown & Levinson (1987: 68) suggest that the confession of having omitted some act is face-threatening to the speaker, I would argue that, in Roger's case, the confession carried out in the form of an apology was actually in part a strategy to protect his own face. In short, in performing the speech act of apologising, Bill saved not only his face but also Roger's.

#### **6.4.5 Discussion**

This part of the discussion will include a summary of the analysis and some additional insights. Culpeper et al (2003:1552) state that, “there is no claim, then, that one can reconstruct the actual intentions of a speaker, but rather that ‘plausible’ intentions can be reconstructed, given adequate evidence”. In line with Culpeper’s assertion, the interpretation of this pair is based mainly on the observations of their ongoing interactions, their weekly reflective journals and the e-interviews. This analysis was about the way in which apology was used as a token to show consideration for the other person and also how apology was used as a response to save faces and secure status.

Bill’s apology, which took a more humorous form, aimed to show his thoughtfulness for his e-pal, but, even though Bill intended to use his apology to show his friendliness and care for Roger, it could still be interpreted otherwise. Roger interpreted Bill’s apology as seeming to imply that the reason for his delay was the language difficulty. Thus the analysis of Roger’s email showed that Roger’s counter-apology was intended to save not only Bill’s face but his own.

To conclude, it is interesting to see how an apology can work as a response and how it can function differently in different situations. In particular, although Brown & Levinson (1987) point out that making apologies is face-threatening to the apologisee’s own face, it is noted in this case that an apology can still sometimes be face-threatening to the hearer’s positive face. Bill’s care conveyed from his apology was in fact face-threatening to Roger, making Roger think that his language ability had been questioned. Fortunately, Roger and Bill had a good relationship and their past interactions had been good. Thus it is very unlikely that Roger would have considered Bill’s apology to be ill intended.

In addition, I should point out another possible interpretation, which was not included in the main analysis because of the lack of support in the data. As pointed out before, Bill's apology seems to intend to show his sensitivity to his e-pal's feelings, but Bill's apology may have had a different purpose: to confirm whether his e-pal had received that particular email or not.

Since it was the routine for the participants of this intercultural email communication project to write to each other at least once a week, Roger's non-response after Bill wrote the long email had broken the agreement on norms of interactions. Roger's non-response could be ascribed to two possible causes: 1) Roger had incurred difficulty reading through the email, as presupposed in Bill's journal; 2) Bill's email had gone missing and Roger never received it. The first point has been covered above. I will thus focus on the second point only.

Since email is the only means of communication for the participants, technical problems inevitably occurred from time to time. Missing emails were the most common technical problems across all pairs. Thus it seems logical to infer that Bill may have been uncertain whether Roger's non-response was due to difficulties in reading his email or this technical problem. By offering an apology for making Roger read the long email, Bill not only showed consideration for Roger's feelings, if he had received it without replying, but also brought this particular email to Roger's attention, in the event that it had gone missing. Thus Bill's apology could also be construed as an indirect way of enquiring about the receipt of the email. According to Bean and Johnstone (1994), an apology can be semiforceful in some ways. For instance, "I'm sorry" is frequently used in daily conversation to initiate an interruption of one speaker by another. In this case, the apology is given before the offence so the apologisee can cut into the conversation. Bean and Johnstone's point establishes that

apologies can have different pragmatic force according to contexts. Seen from this perspective, Bill's apology could have embedded a semiforce to bring to his e-pal's attention the particular email of concern to Bill. Although this interpretation cannot be confirmed from the collected data, the possibility of such use of an apology may be worth noting.

### **6.5 Conclusion for Chapter 6**

In this chapter, I have introduced three communicative events namely, the near accident experience, avoiding political topics and apologising for the long email. They were discussed in relation to other relevant factors, such as the writer's communicative goal, the context of the event and the interactants' relationships. The three communicative events presented in Chapter 6 show that the interactants were not only interested in attending to their epals' face needs, but were also concerned about their own faces. Three main points can be concluded from the three analyses.

First, there seem to be numerous ways in email interactions to create intimacy. In pair 7, Penny and Peter formed closeness by employing code-switching (to Chinese written-out laughter) and repetitions. They were seen as tokens of agreement and recognition of each other. Both repetition and code-switching conveyed a sense of intimacy because they created a common ground for the interactants and, therefore, forged bonding.

Secondly, it was noticed that computer-mediated paralinguages were used in different contexts to assist meaning transmission. For instance, written-out laughter and emoticons were used by pair 7 to create the joking atmosphere. Similarly, pair 8, in addition to the use of endearments (i.e. buddy, mate), used animation faces to express humour or friendliness. Based on the examples, it can be concluded that

people used different computer-mediated features to construct ‘virtual faces’ which then allowed their readers to receive the ‘emotion’ part of the text.

Finally, in the last communicative event, apology was not only used to show concern for the other person’s face, but was also used to save the apologisee’s face. Bill’s apology, in pair 9, aims to show his consideration for his email. However, since his apology would indirectly question Roger’s English ability to read a long English email, Roger made a counter-apology, which indicated his reasons for not being able to reply sooner. Thus, although making an apology is normally considered a threat to the apologisee’s face, it could be, as in this example, used to save the apologisee’s own face. Thus, again, the interpretation of the pragmatic meaning of a speech act should be context sensitive.

## Chapter 7

### Synthetic Discussion

#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter consists of three parts. In 7.2, a summary of the analysis sections will be illustrated in a table followed by a commentary. Section 7.3 contains further discussion pertaining to the speech acts and (im)politeness strategies used in email communication across all nine pairs, as well as their implications in relation to the research questions. In 7.4, some concluding remarks based on the present investigation are made.

#### 7.2 Table Summary

In the previous chapters, I conducted an in-depth analysis on each of the 9 pairs of participants. In each analysis, the speech acts and (im)politeness strategies used in a certain communicative event were considered, along with other contextualised factors, such as topics, communicative routines and personal background. The focal points of each analysis are illustrated in the table below. The table is composed of four elements: communicative event, speech act, face work and (im)politeness strategies. Before going to the table summary, I first introduce the theme of each column. Column one contains the communicative events of each pair. The communicative events were selected for in-depth analysis because they appeared to be salient to the pair's email correspondence, meaning that the communicative event continued for several email exchanges or the event appeared to be important in developing the interactants' interpersonal relationship and intercultural understanding. After the summary of the communicative events, the second column shows the speech acts analysed in each communicative event. Following Searle's view of the *intentionality* of speech acts,



this thesis adopted Searle's speech act taxonomies and has attempted to add some new insights to their investigation. It should be noted that expressive speech acts (in boldface) were used in 8 out of the 9 pairs of emails. Expressive speech acts appear to be prominent across the data. I address this point further in the next section. Here it is enough to say that expressives are a primary speech act in shaping interpersonal relationships.

Following the investigation of speech acts used in the emails, they were further investigated for their syntactic and semantic meanings in the context. The third and fourth columns deal with the (im)politeness meanings of the acts, in terms of the face negotiations and the strategies used in realising the face work. The main theoretical frameworks used for the discussion of face work are Goffman's 'face' theory and Brown & Levinson's politeness theory. Based on the data analysis of this thesis, there were times when Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies could not sufficiently explain the situation or where the politeness strategies appeared to work differently because of the context. Arguments derived from them were shaped through the analysis. The strategies which were not addressed in Brown & Levinson's politeness theory were shown in italic form. Furthermore, other researchers' empirical works (e.g. Holmes, 2003; Locher, 2004; 2006; Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2008) were cited in the data analysis to provide new theorisations for the understanding of politeness and impoliteness in the context. The table summary is presented below.

	Pair	Analysis	Communicative event	Speech act	Face work	(Im)politeness strategy
		Participant				
Chapter 4	1	Ed (Taiwanese /Male)	9/11 Event	* <b>Expressives</b> (expressing different opinions)	Ed attacked Keith's face by challenging his argument.	* Bald on record * <i>Rhetorical questions</i>
		Keith (American /Male)		*Assertives (show statistics) * <b>Expressives</b> (opinion)	Keith protected his face by countering Ed's viewpoints.	*Presuppose common ground *Bald on record * <i>Rhetorical questions</i>
	2	Matthew (American /Male)	Proposing	* <b>Expressives</b> (conditional clause)	Matthew attended to Chloe's face by showing how he valued her opinions.	*Hedging opinions *Presuppose common ground
		Chloe (Taiwanese /Female)		* <b>Expressives</b> (present her opinions)	Chloe took offence at Matthew's short email. She adjusted her email length and the use of vocatives in order to save her own face.	*Change of in-group identity markers (Address forms) * <i>Vernacular writing style</i>
	3	Sherry (Taiwanese /Female)	Interview advice	*Directives (informality of writing)	Sherry boosted Andy's positive face by asking for Andy's advice.	* Intensify interest to hear * <i>Self-deprecation to boost Andy's status</i>
		Andy (British /Male)		*advice-giving	Andy further consolidated his own face by giving direct advice.	*Bald on record
Chapter 5	4	Eve (British /Female)	Dieting	* <b>Expressives</b> (question)	Eve did not wish her disagreement to offend May's face.	*Be conventionally indirect *In-group identity markers
		May (Taiwanese /Female)		* <b>Expressives</b> (answer)	May supported Eve's face by approving Eve's views.	*Avoidance of adjustment of reports to hearer's point of view * <i>Repetition</i>
	5	Jane (Taiwanese /Female)	Relationship issues	* <b>Expressives</b> (opinions)	Jane did not wish Helen's face to be offended by Jane's criticism about a British man so she modified her tone in the end.	*Hedging opinions *Don't presume
		Helen (British /Female)		* <b>Expressives</b> (rhetorical question)	Helen's reply aimed to attend to Jane's face need for being approved.	*Assert common ground *Avoid disagreement

Chapter 6	6	Joy (Taiwanese /Female)	Offensive questions	* <b>Expressives</b> (greeting, apology)	Joy was worried that her questions might have offended Doris and threatened Doris' face.	*Apologize (Indicate reluctance) *Give deference
		Doris (American /Female)		* <b>Expressives</b> (greeting, apology)	To boost Joy's face want to be liked, Doris used greetings and salutations which they did not normally use.	*Use in-group identity markers (Address forms) *Apologize
	7	Penny (Taiwanese /Female)	Near accident	* <b>Expressives</b> (written-out laughter)	Penny attended to Peter's positive face by showing intimacy.	*Joke * Use of in-group language or dialect
		Peter (British /Male)		* <b>Expressives</b> (repetition)	Peter supported Penny's positive face by imitating the jokes in Penny's email.	*Joke *Use of in-group language or dialect *Repetition
	8	Calvin (British /Male)	Avoiding Political topic	* <b>Expressives</b> (opinion)	Calvin chose to express his political views in a safer way in order to avoid threatening Nelson's face if Nelson had a different political stance.	*Safe topic *Impersonalize speaker and hearer
		Nelson (Taiwanese /Male)		* <b>Commissives</b> (commitment)	Nelson made a brief response to avoid possible disagreement which might threaten both Calvin and Nelson's faces.	*Time switch *Avoidance of adjustment of reports to hearer's point of view
	9	Bill (British /Male)	Apologising for the long email	* <b>Expressives</b> (apology)	Bill's apology aimed to protect Roger's face. It was to prevent Roger from the embarrassment of not having replied.	*Apologise (admit the impingement)
		Roger (Taiwanese /Male)		* <b>Expressives</b> (apology)	Roger saved Bill's face want to be liked by assuring Bill that Roger's late reply was not due to the lack of interest in Bill's emails but it because of Roger's illness and work. By showing his heavy workload, Roger also supported his own face by showing his professional image.	*Apologise (Give overwhelming reasons)

Table 7.1: Table summary for each communicative event

### **7.2.1 Expressive speech act**

As can be seen in the table summary, expressive speech acts appeared to be salient across all pairs. Expressive speech acts, as discussed in the literature review, aim to express the “sincerity condition of the speech act”.

In this research project, expressive speech acts were used with different (im)politeness strategies in different communicative events in order to attain various communicative goals. For instance, expressive speech acts were used to express opinions (pairs 1, 2, 4, 5 and 8), apologise (pairs 6 and 9) and make jokes (pair 7). Furthermore, it was argued in the analysis that expressive speech acts were formulated in different syntactic forms in order to work collaboratively with the (im)politeness strategies used in the emails. For example, even though in both pair 1 and pair 4 the participants aimed to express their opinions using questions, the participants in pair 1 aimed to attack the other person’s face by using interrogative questions, whereas one of the participants in pair 4 used questions to indirectly reveal her opinions. Despite both pairs using questions to express opinions, the intended (im)politeness effects intended by their using the speech acts were opposed. This observation illustrates once more one of the main arguments made in this thesis, which is the importance of ‘context’ in the negotiation and understanding of sentence meaning. Schiffrin (1990:241) suggests that argument “can be a co-operative way of speaking as well as (or instead of) a competitive way of speaking”. Similarly, Locher also states that “Context is not a stable construct. Interactants interpret what they see and hear and continually use this flood of incoming information to make sense of the focal event” (2004:49). In line with Locher’s notion of context, this thesis also shows that linguistic form is not the same as function. The interactants’ perceptions of what is appropriate or inappropriate during the interaction could vary from time to time. So

appropriateness is constantly renegotiated.

This view is discussed in more detail below in the responses to the research questions. This summary of the findings from the data analysis feeds into the responses of the study's research questions. In the next section, I address the research questions with examples drawn from the data analysis chapters and provide some additional comments from the range of participants' e-journals and e-interviews.

### **7.3 Discussion based on the research questions**

This thesis discusses the development of intercultural understanding in emails with a particular focus on the meaning negotiation between individuals from geographically distant locations. Following Holliday's notion of 'small cultures' (see Chapter 2), I investigate the emergent 'culture' in the email intercultural communication. Culture is probably better understood when it is seen as a process of meaning formation and a development of understanding between individuals. In order to investigate how people from different backgrounds create intercultural understanding and develop interpersonal relationships via email, this study focuses on the meaning negotiation in the interactions utilising a discourse analysis approach taken from the speech act and politeness theories. Through the investigation of speech acts and (im)politeness performances in the context, the process of meaning negotiation has been further explored. Following the summary chart of the research findings presented in 7.1, above, this section focuses on answering the research questions raised in Chapter 1.

# **1. What is the content of e-mail exchanges between the speakers of Chinese and English in this intercultural email communication?**

The first research question aimed to investigate how people get to know each other and what topics they bring up during their email exchanges. During the 12-week email correspondence, a wide range of topics emerged in the exchanges. More general topics, such as music, movies or personal life were popular across all pairs at the outset of the email correspondence. Helen made a comment about the topics they discussed in their emails. “Topics that we have discussed are usually quite general. Talking about things like university life and TV programs are most popular probably because we can both relate to these topics” (Helen’s week 5 e-journal). May also thought that everyday topics were most popular in their email correspondence. She stated, “I think the topics we talk about most related to our own lives. Many subjects have been talked about, the most recent is our families and dreams” (week 5 May’s e-journal). Similarly, Penny also stated, “Maybe life is the most common topic since we all have that” (Penny’s week 5 e-journal).

According to these reflections, general topics were discussed because they were common to people’s everyday lives. Thus, everyone, more or less, was able to contribute some thoughts on these topics. The observations of the participants’ emails and their reflections suggest that sharing everyday experience and finding connections from such exchanges were common across all pairs. It would seem that the participants’ inclination to find general topics at the beginning of their email interaction stemmed from two factors. First, all the interactions between participants were made by email. The lack of face-to-face contact may have increased the difficulty of making the acquaintance of another person. Thus, the most effective way for the interactants to begin to know one another could be through sharing life

experiences. In addition, since everyone has his/her own past experience, it was not difficult for people to contribute some thoughts and engage in discussion.

This view conforms to Brown & Levinson's positive politeness strategy: they remark that "the raising of 'safe topics' allows S to stress his agreement with H and therefore to satisfy H's desire to be 'right', or to be corroborated in his opinions" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 112). They point out that "such rapport inspiring topics are commonly raised as a way of doing the FTA of initiating an encounter with a stranger" (ibid.). Their argument seems applicable to most of the situations in this email project where 'safe topics' were used to initiate conversations between people who had not come across each other before. Gradually, moving away from those general topics, the participants were able to establish more understanding about their e-pals' backgrounds. The background knowledge accumulated from the email correspondence could then be used as references in developing intercultural understanding. Since in this case email was their only channel of interaction, it was also important to learn how to develop and maintain their relationship with their e-pals through 'words'. In this regard, topics (i.e. movies, music, food) which were less likely to cause face concerns were often initiated in this project. Topics (e.g. politics, sex, religion) which are more likely to elicit controversial responses could cause face concerns to both the interactants. This view can be better illustrated by looking at the example of pair 1. The argument between the participants Keith (American) and Ed (Taiwanese) was about the events of 9/11. The interactants' stances on the event were divergent. The disagreement on the topic created conflicts between the interactants. It is pointed out in the data analysis that the topic of 9/11, which related to terrorism, religion and many other serious political issues, could engage great personal attachment and feeling from the speakers. Thus, disagreement

from the interlocutor could be easily taken as an unfriendly remark. Keith commented in his e-interview that:

the issue of 911/Iraq which is very emotional for many people, is not something everyone wants to talk about or revisit ... I would have avoided the topic because it was the catalyst for his withdrawal from the project. I wanted to learn from him. That went by the wayside.

Keith's statement revealed his feeling that the emotions involved in the discussion of this topic had hindered their communication. His comment reflects an important point made in Locher's work, her argument that 'tolerance for disagreement' is positively related to the situation. She writes,

A topic can differ in its degree of controversialness (controversial versus non-controversial), which will influence how disagreement is expressed because the more controversial a topic is, the riskier it is to express a different opinion ... A participant's topic engagement (involved versus not involved) and his or her familiarity with both the subject and the other interlocutor also crucially influences disagreement.

(Locher, 2004:98)

Locher stresses that 'topic,' like other contextualized factors (i.e. situation, age, relationship) in interactions, should not be neglected in the investigation of communication. The effects that a 'topic' can have on an item of communication may exceed what appears to be under discussion in regard to the topic. As in Keith and Ed's case, the analysis shows that the tension between the interactants may have been the interplay of disagreement on the topic, power negotiation and the interlocutors' national backgrounds.

Given the above discussion, it seems reasonable to suggest that 'topic' should also be considered as an important contextualised element in this investigation of email communication.



## **2. What are the salient speech act(s) in the communicative events and how are they used to negotiate communicative goals?**

Several speech acts were used to realize different communicative goals in the email data. These speech acts were assertives, expressives, commissives, directives and advice-giving. Among the speech acts, the expressive speech act appeared to be salient across all pairs. According to the table summary presented in section 7.1, eight out of the nine pairs of participants employed expressive speech acts in the selected emails.

Yet it is interesting to note that, even though expressive speech acts were frequently used, their communicative purposes were often different. Because of the pervasive use of expressive speech acts, I want to discuss further the interplay between expressive speech acts, the selected (im)politeness strategies and the communicative goals in the context.

Gilbert (1999) notes that “[e]xpressive speech acts are, at the very least, the handmaiden of meaning. When genuine, (a requirement for any speech act,) they can clarify, amplify and precise the intended message” (p.232). That is to say, expressive speech acts can be used simply to express views or feelings (i.e. I am sorry) or can work with other speech acts to form some other meaning than expressing an opinion (i.e. I am sorry to say this but you’re fired.). Agreeing with Gilbert’s argument, this study also finds that expressive speech acts can be performed using speech acts of different forms in order to stress or moderate an intended message. To state this argument more specifically, it was observed in the data analysis that questions were used as a way of expressing opinions. Questions, as defined in Searle’s taxonomy, are directive speech acts which aim to elicit responses or answers (See section 5, Chapter 2). However, this study shows that questions can be used to transmit opinions. I will

illustrate my point using two examples from the emails of pair 1 and pair 4. In these, questions were used as a way of expressing opinions.

In pair 1, Ed disagreed with what Keith had suggested about the events of 9/11. In response to Keith's email, Ed expressed his different views in a series of questions. "Why even the children got inspired from the attack? Do they like to see people get hurt? Or they have been really bored for a long time?" Based on the discussion in the previous chapter, these questions were rhetorical questions which did not expect answers. The questions were used to make his point unmistakable, through the obviousness of their answers. It was also pointed out in the analysis that the series of questions was face-threatening to Keith because the questions were used to assert Ed's own opinion and challenge Keith's argument.

Another example of using questions to convey the writer's opinions can be seen from pair 4. In this exchange, Eve responded to May's diet plan. Eve stated, "Why is it that many girls living in Asia are on a diet?" At first glance, the question seemed to be an inquiry which was seeking an answer. However, I argued that her question needed to be understood from its syntactic relations with other sentences in the passage. Thus, the question was analysed in relation to its antecedent and subsequent sentences. The statement before the question ('You are on a diet!') was a repeated sentence from May's previous email. However, the sentence was added with an exclamation mark to indicate strong feeling. Following this opening, Eve asked her question. Yet before May could answer it, Eve had provided the material for possible answers. Thus, the question in the context functioned more as a lead-in to her perceptions regarding diet. Her final remark was 'but still diet is not good for your health'. Seen from the context, it was not difficult to see that Eve was actually against dieting. The inquiry, though put in question form, was not meant to be answered. It

was argued that Eve's question allowed her to transmit her attitudes in a not too intrusive way.

Clearly, then, expressive speech acts can be performed using the question formula for various communicative purposes. Leech (1983:107) suggests that expressive speech acts are mainly associated with positive politeness. His assertion appears to conflict with the findings in this study, which show that the functions of expressive speech acts varied from context to context. They might be used as impoliteness strategy to deliberately attack others' faces, as pair 1 used them. Alternatively, they may appear as a negative politeness strategy to hedge opinions, as pair 4 used them.

Furthermore, it was shown that the expressive speech act could be in different linguistic forms. This view of speech acts could pertain to its rhetorical function in the context. This might suggest an arbitrary correlation between form and function, such as some researchers have cautioned against. The traditional approach to speech act study (see Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1979) is challenged for its inadequacy to explain all the language behaviours in interactions. Porayska-Pomsta et al (2000) find in their study about possible ways of classifying speech acts that "syntactically identical speech acts such as negative and positive polarity questions may be used to perform different communicative goals." They further point out that "different speech act forms may be used to fulfill similar communicative goals" (p.271) Similarly, Holmes (1995:10) also asserts that "[t]here is nothing intrinsically polite about any linguistic form." Following Holmes' argument, I believe also that instead of classifying speech acts in accordance with their syntactic forms, speech acts should be analysed in terms of their communicative functions in context. This thesis argues that speech acts should be understood in terms of their semantic and pragmatic functions

in particular contexts where other interactive factors interrelate and shape the communicative goals.

### **3. How does the meaning of (im)politeness manifest itself in intercultural email communication?**

In the previous 3 chapters, I showed how different (im)politeness strategies were used in the emails. It has been stressed that the meaning of acts of (im)politeness was negotiated between the interactants. Thus, the investigation of (im)politeness meaning in emails should not only focus on the sentence level but also consider the function of the sentence within the context. The analysis of this study considered the process and the development of the communicative event, the interactants' relationship, the language use and the interactants' understanding of the event. Locher (2004:91) suggests that "[p]oliteness cannot be investigated without looking in detail at the context, the speakers, the situation and the evoked norms." She further proposes looking at politeness from the speaker and the addressee's perspectives. "A polite utterance is a speaker's intended, marked and appropriate behavior which displays face concern ... Addressees will interpret an utterance as polite when it is perceived as appropriate and marked ..." (Locher, 2004:212). Locher seems to suggest that what has been understood by the hearer may or may not be the same as the speaker's intended meaning. Thus, the meaning of politeness is negotiated through interactions. Following this trend of thought, it is reasonable to investigate communication discursively in order to better understand how the interactants come to agree or disagree on what is (im)politeness.

Hymes (1974: 5) proposes that communication should be studied in terms of the "communicative form and function in integral relation to each other." In line with this

view of Hymes, this thesis has investigated the meaning of (im)politeness in the interactants' email correspondence by taking into consideration the participants' backgrounds, relationships, interactive norms and the language use in the context. The observations of the different dynamics of email communication have then fed into the understanding of the ways in which the participants created intercultural understanding. According to the data analysis, the meaning of (im)politeness can only be the interactants' understanding based on collective references from the ongoing interactions. By 'collective references', I refer to the cues which the interactants accumulated in the course of the interactions with their e-pals (i.e. background knowledge, interactive norms, interpersonal relationship). This is not to suggest that the linguistic performance has no influence on the construction of (im)politeness. However, evaluating a sentence's (im)politeness meaning from its linguistic performance alone is problematic, since what appears to be impolite in one context might be polite and appropriate in another. Locher also points out that "no linguistic form or strategy can be inherently more or less polite" (Locher, 2004: 86). I can further illustrate the point with examples from this study.

First, disagreement does not always result in conflicts. In pair 4, Eve (British/Female) wrote to show her disagreement with May's (Taiwanese/Female) decision to diet. Instead of showing her disagreement overtly, Eve used questions ('Why is it that many girls living in Asia are on a diet?') to convey her opinion. As discussed in the analysis, posing questions was an interactive norm between Eve and May. Hence, the use of the question formula to reveal Eve's disagreement may have seemed less offensive because of their mutual acknowledgement of the norm. In addition to this existing norm, Eve also attempted to modify her negative view on diet by showing her understanding of one of the pressures of living in an Asian society

(“Sometimes I feel pressure too because my mum watches many HK tv shows (where the actress is very thin)”). Eve showed empathy, using her background knowledge of the diet phenomenon in Asian society. In response to Eve’s email, May built up a case for dieting on Eve’s previous email. She stated, ‘Many girls in my country are on a diet. Maybe we are all influenced by mass media. When I watch TV and read magazines, most of the models and leading characters are all thin.’ Aligning herself with Eve’s viewpoint, May not only satisfied Eve’s want to be approved, but also saved her own face in thus defending her decision to diet. In this example, disagreement did not result in tension. On the contrary, the disagreement was interpreted by May as a friendly gesture, which then led to her positive reply to Eve. The politeness, as seen in this data, took a reciprocal form.

‘Humour’ and ‘code-switching’ are also politeness strategies to convey intimacy. In pair 7, Penny (Taiwanese/Female) wrote to Peter (British/Male) about her near accident. Penny made a joke about it and suggested that Peter should cherish her email because he might not have heard from her again if she had been unlucky. Peter then teased her, saying ‘I think Sharon would be very upset as she would lose an important person in her experiment\project ... 哈哈. (Just teasing you).’ Peter extended Penny’s joke and implied that I (Sharon) would also be affected if she (Penny) ‘disappeared’. It was argued in the data analysis of this pair that Peter continued with Penny’s code-switching of Chinese written-out laughter and joke in order to signify his intimacy and camaraderie with Penny. This interpretation was made on the basis of observing of the pair’s relations and past interactions. It was observed that they had emailed one another very often since the beginning of their email correspondence. By the time this particular communicative took place in the 6<sup>th</sup> week, they had already sent 38 emails in total. Since they emailed one another fairly

often, they got to know one another well. Thus, the joke was considered a token of intimacy and the code-switching signified their alliances with one another.

Brown & Levinson (1987) also point out that jokes and code-switching are positive strategies to create in-group identities and claim common ground with each other. Even though I agree with Brown & Levinson's point, it should be noted that what makes a joke or the switch of a language function as a politeness strategy is not the strategy itself, but the consensus between interactants who are willing to interpret the joke and Chinese written-out laughter as a positive and friendly gesture. The humour works for Peter and Penny and it may have strengthened their relationship. However, the same joke may not work in the same way for other pairs or in other contexts. This is because the understanding of 'politeness' is developed and (re)negotiated in the course of interpersonal contacts. It is possible for the understanding of 'politeness' to be renegotiated since the dynamics of interactions can change. A good example of the renegotiation of politeness can be seen from pair 1. As discussed earlier, a confrontation arose during their exchanges on the topic of the events of 9/11. In the analysis, Ed's bold and direct views on the topic appeared to offend Keith and incurred Keith's antagonistic response. The dispute between them resulted ultimately in the disruption of their email correspondence. Although disagreement, as suggested by Brown & Levinson (1987:66), could cause tension because "the speaker does not care about the addressee's feelings, wants, etc.", the degree of tension brought by the disagreement can vary. In Ed and Keith's case, the seriousness of the topic of 9/11 event seems to have been an important reason which aggravated the impact of their disagreement (see pair 1 analysis). It could be that neither the directness nor the disagreement itself would have led to the disruption. This inference is based on two of their previous email exchanges. At one point, Ed

wrote in his email “Dear Keith, are you Black?” Ed’s directness in addressing the topic of ethnicity did not cause unpleasant feelings from Keith. On the contrary, Keith expressed in his e-interview that he found Ed’s directness on such a topic amusing in itself.

As for the disagreement, Keith and Ed had different opinions about the definition of ‘friendship’ in their week 6 email correspondence. Even though they did not reconcile their ideas at the end of email in week 6, the interchange did not cause tension. This observation is meant to show that disagreement or directness between them could be, but did not necessarily have to be, the main cause of their conflict. Thus, it may be suggested that the confrontation between Keith and Ed was the result of the interplay between the disagreement, their directness and the topic. The seriousness of the topic could have inflamed the interactants’ emotional reactions to their disagreements and directness.

This example demonstrates that the meaning of (im)politeness is context-dependent. The interactants negotiate their perceptions of politeness during their interactions. Following Hymes’ ‘ethnography of communication’, which proposes to investigate language use through the lenses of the diversity of speech, repertoires and ways of speaking in communication, this thesis concludes that a single standard interpretation of any act is inadequate. It is through the references which are collected along the course way of the interactions that one can better perceive the dynamics of (im)politeness in the context.

#### **4. To what extent can email contribute to intercultural communication and understanding?**

This research question aimed first to investigate how its participants interacted



and developed intercultural understanding via email. From there, the thesis sought to explore how email shapes our understanding of culture.

According to Holliday (2004), there are generally two conceptualisations of culture in ESL - large culture and small culture (see Chapter 2). Large culture divides the social world into different ethnic groups and nations, highlighting differences between ethnic groups. Small culture defines culture as an ongoing process emerging in the interactions between individuals, meaning that small culture “may or may not have significant ethnic, national or international qualities” (Holliday, 2004:64). Holliday’s definition of small culture leads to my belief that individuals are the basic elements which form and create meaning for ‘culture’. Thus, in order to understand the meaning of ‘culture’, it is reasonable to look at its essential element (individuals) and investigate the process (interaction) through which ‘culture’ is developed. In this view, culture could be an emergent phenomenon, rather than a static notion. This is to suggest that the nation-based culture views will be better informed if it is to be seen in relation to how people from different nations negotiate interpersonal and intercultural understanding.

Hence, the research question of how email contributes to intercultural communication should be answered by looking at the ways in which people interact via email and how intercultural understanding is developed in email. First, the qualities of email are discussed in relation to intercultural communication. Second, I look at the electronic paralanguage which appears to work as an important component in developing email intercultural understanding. The discussion is presented in: a) interactions via email; and b) electronic paralinguistic features in intercultural communication.

#### a. Interactions via email

Without knowing one another's gender, profession and background before their first interaction, the participants of this project negotiated and formed their identities through their email correspondence with their e-pals. Through the email interactions, the participants gradually developed knowledge about their counterparts. Email, in a sense, was not merely a tool for communication, but also a channel for people to make acquaintance with and form an understanding of each other. In this regard, email can be an important link in intercultural communication because the convenience of email allows more effective and efficient communication between people from different countries. There are two qualities of email which create the possibilities of rich intercultural communication.

##### i) Email is an asynchronous communication

Since email is an asynchronous communication, the participants took turns writing emails to each other from their different locations. Unlike face-to-face interaction, in which the interactants' responses are expected by their counterparts to be immediate, email communication allows interactants to have some time and space before making a response. People can compose their emails at their convenience. This view is supported by the participants' feedback. Participants on reflection said that email allowed them to reflect and ponder over their compositions before they actually sent their email. Doris, a participant from pair 6, commented on face-to-face communication and email communication: "In face to face communications there tends to be shorter turns, but more frequent. Similarly, the conversations can only take place within a set bracket of time to maintain relevance. Virtual communication allows communication to transcend this time limitation" (Doris' week 10 e-journal).

Doris' statement implies that because the response time for email is more lenient, it gives the writer time to think about what to write and time to edit it before sending. Bill from pair 9 also made a similar comment: that "for some people it is easier to express themselves clearly in email form as they can compose their thoughts slowly and carefully" (Bill's e-interview).

Furthermore, it was observed in this intercultural project that the response time between the participants after receiving an email was around two to three days. Roger from pair 9 considered that the appropriate response time should be about three days. He explained, "We both have work to do every day. And it needs time to reply the mail. During the three days, it can keep the topic fresh and hot. If we take a long time to reply to the mail, sometimes we will forget what the subject we are discussing" (Roger's e-interview). Calvin also indicated that a reasonable time for replying an email was three to four days because "[p]eople have busy lives and this is a factor that affects the reply" (Calvin's e-interview). It can be seen from the participants' feedback that even though there were no black-and-white rules for interacting via email, the participants still formed views about what they thought was (in)appropriate to email, such as the appropriate time between receiving and replying to an email, the appropriate length of an email, appropriate topics. The rules of appropriateness in email interactions could be formed and negotiated during the interactions with their e-pals and the values could change in different contexts (e.g. in pair 9, when Bill shared the account of his trip to Hong Kong with Roger, he probably hoped to hear back from his e-pal sooner.) The negotiation of agreement on the appropriate response time can be essential in email interactions. The participants become aware of the similarities and differences between themselves and others through what they do and write in their emails, not by their physical appearance.

Moreover, the asynchronous communication of email could have pedagogical value for language learning. As mentioned earlier, email interaction is not real time communication and the email writer has more time to write and present her/his ideas. Thus, even people who are not eloquent in expressing their thoughts, or people who are not proficient in the target language when used for communication can have sufficient time to express their ideas properly. This can be seen as an advantage of email if it is applied to language education. Like the participants in this project, the English speakers and the Chinese speakers could take turns to express their views and even practise using foreign languages in their emails without fearing any pressure to respond immediately but still with the feeling of taking part in an interaction. The implications for teaching language and culture are further discussed in the next chapter.

#### ii) Absence of nonverbal cues

Another noticeable quality of email communication is the absence of nonverbal cues, such as the speaker's appearance and gestures. Baym (1995) points out that, "[i]nteractants gain greater anonymity because their gender, race, rank, physical appearance and other features of public identity are not immediately evident" (Baym, 1995: 140). Consequent on Baym's argument, I infer that without face-to-face contacts between the interactants, the participants in this project were more able to concentrate on the presented words and ideas. On the one hand, as discussed above, email writers were given more flexible time and space to present their ideas. On the other, email readers could also focus on the thoughts presented in the email, since the content of the email was the main source of the exchanges.

Similarly, Ma (1996) points out that "in the absence of visual cues, CMC tends to

promote egalitarian and uninhibited behaviors” (p.176). Consistent with Ma’s findings, the analysis of this project showed that age, gender, or profession did not seem to be prominent in the exchanges of emails. Most participants in this research project contributed their thoughts and ideas during the email interactions. As shown in the table summary in section 7.1, above, the analysis showed that eight out of the nine pairs of participants employed expressive speech acts in fulfilling their different communicative goals. This phenomenon is not surprising when seen together with the participants’ feedback in their e-journals and e-interviews. The participants noted that they were more willing to express themselves in emails than in face-to-face communication. For example, Joy, a participant in pair 6, considered email a valuable communication channel. “I think the value of virtual interaction is that it eliminates some of the presumptions we made based on their appearances or accents when we meet them in the real world. Also, the virtual world provides a comfort zone that real world interaction lacks. Since people can be anyone they claim to be, they would feel more protected and relaxed when interacting with other people” (Joy’s week 10 e-journal). Another example can be seen in Eve’s e-interview. She stated, “it felt easier to talk about personal matters than in the real world. Maybe because the emotional side of face to face conversations are lost. I felt less of being judged in virtual conversations “ (Eve’s e-interview).

On the basis of the participants’ feedback and the investigations of this study, it seems safe to suggest that email provides a comfortable environment for the participants to speak their mind without being too concerned over their counterpart’s immediate reactions. Still, I would not suggest that email is the key to success in intercultural communication. Although email provides a private and safe environment for people to take time to organize their thoughts and express their opinions, it does

not necessarily mean that every writer's message will be accurately understood by every receiver, nor that smooth interactions will be guaranteed. I argue that the lack of nonverbal cues does not equal the absence of contextualization cues. In order to achieve a successful email interaction, it is essential for the interactants to be aware that contextualization cues still play a part in their interactions. Furthermore, the meaning of (im)politeness can be negotiated and created when the cues are recognized by the interactants.

On the basis of this argument, the next section discusses the way in which the participants' (im)politeness meanings were presented in emails. I discuss how electronic paralinguistic features were used in the email content to help create the writer's intended meanings.

#### b. Electronic paralinguistic features in intercultural communication

Although many researchers (e.g., Short, Williams & Christie, 1976; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984) have suggested that computer-mediated communication lacks 'social presence' and 'social context cues', I would argue the opposite. Instead of seeing computer-mediated communication as a cues-filtering-out form of communication, I think that computer-mediated communication, when seen not merely as a tool of communication, but as a form of communication, is also socially and contextually shaped. That is to say, as in face-to-face communication, interactants in computer-mediated communication also vary their interactive strategies to facilitate their communication. Bolter states, "Electronic text is, like an oral text, dynamic" (Bolter, 1991: 59). Ma (1996) also argues that "[a]lthough nonverbal cues are inaccessible in CMC, alternative relational cues are available to its participants" (p.176). She argues that "the choice of topics, words, syntax and punctuation marks

can all serve as relational cues” (ibid). Previously, it was shown that the choice of topics could be influential in determining the degree of impoliteness (see pair 1 analysis). In addition, the study showed how a sense of intimacy was created through playful interactions. In addition, the prevalence of the use of electronic paralanguage (i.e. emoticons, written out laughter, eccentric spelling) was also an important email feature which conveyed some writers’ meaning. Carey (1980:67) defines electronic paralinguistic features as “the voice qualities and tones which communicate expressive feelings, indicate the age, health and sex of a speaker, modify the meanings of words and help to regulate interaction between speakers.” Consistent with Carey’s statement, this thesis also finds that the participants in this project varied the use of electronic paralinguistic features in order to more accurately transmit their intended meanings.

For instance, Peter (pair 7) wrote to express his concern for Penny’s near accident: ‘I am glad you have gotten over your ‘near accident’ with the wagon and can still email me. I think Sharon would be very upset as she would lose an important person in her experiment\project ... 哈哈(ha ha ha). (Just teasing you)’ (the English translations of the Chinese characters are mine). As this example shows, the main communicative goal in Peter’s writing was to express his concern. Yet his concern for Penny took form with a joke. It was shown in the data analysis section that the joke was meant to create intimacy and develop rapport between writer and reader. Without such contextualization cues as body gestures or facial expressions, Peter utilised the Chinese word “哈哈” (ha ha ha) to create a laughter sound, indicating his intention to make the joke. In addition, as discussed in the data analysis, when Penny talked about her near-accident, she also described it in a jokey tone. Thus, Peter’s continuation of her joke can be seen as Peter’s approval and recognition of

their close relationship. Furthermore, using the written-out laughter in Chinese characters could build solidarity with Penny, since she frequently applied them in her emails. As seen in this example, Peter's intention in expressing his concern for Penny was enacted by a joke. The choices of politeness strategies (joke) and computer-mediated features (written-out laughter) were means to demonstrate their mutual understanding of the level of intimacy. In this example, the written-out laughter was used to assist understanding of the intended meaning of the message. The manipulation of words to enliven email is not unique. In email discourse, there are other common digital features (e.g. emoticons, eccentric spellings, multiple punctuations, abbreviations) which are used to facilitate expression. Amongst these, emoticons were most frequently used in this project. 9 out of 8 pairs of participants used emoticons in their email exchanges. Some participants commented on the use of emoticons in their journals, as follows:

I find that use of emotive icons are so popular because they help convey expressions and feelings much more effectively than words. Emails usually cannot properly express the tone of voice, body language, mood or facial expression of the writer and their intended message can sometimes be misunderstood. Emotive icons also make email reading and emailing writing more fun to read and write! :p (Helen, week 6 journal).

I use those icons when I feel happy and sad. So “:)” and “:(“ are the two I use most often. Besides, I learn how to use “;-)” from Peter. In a word, icons are quite efficient tool for me to convey my feelings (Penny, week 6 journal).

Sometimes, it's hard to convey my emotions just by words. With icons, I can show my feelings and emotions directly. Besides, I think when people can sense my emotions directly, probably they might think I am a friendly person (well, I'm guessing) (Sherry, week 6 e-journal).

“The use of emotive icons such as :p or :) would imply my e-pal was happy/smiling/laughing which often encourages me to smile/laugh too and use the same emotive icons in return” (Helen's e-interview)



From these participants' comments, it appears that emoticons were considered to be an efficient tool for communicating the writer's emotions and ideas. The participants suggested that emoticons could help them express the intended meaning of their message more accurately. To better illustrate the point, I want to show in the next example how emoticons were used to facilitate the writer's expression.

In pair 8, Calvin's closing indication in his email was to show that he had to stop writing soon because he needed to eat. 'Cheers mate and will go and cook something to eat....i'm hungry and could eat a horse right now if i had one....haha! 😊' (Calvin, pair 8). Of course Calvin was not actually thinking about eating a horse but simply exaggerating his feeling of hunger. To make sure Nelson got the joke, he used both written-out laughter and a smiley face. It is noticeable that the smiley face is not text-based, i.e., formed from symbols on the computer keyboard, such as :-). The graphical image is the representation of a human being's smiley face and is often used in instant messaging programs, such as MSN, and AOL. Since Calvin was a frequent MSN user and had chatted with Nelson on MSN a few times, the MSN graphic images were not alien to either him or Nelson. Calvin's choice of the MSN emoticon may have added a touch of instant messaging to his email, which could lead to the sense of a more casual milieu.

But a smiley face does not work only with jokes. Sometimes, the data of this thesis reveal that the smiley face could also be used with apologies. For example, in pair 9, Roger apologised for not being able to write back sooner because of his work. 'With the result that i couldn't reply to you as soon as possibility. I'm so sorry about that . ^^' (Roger, Pair 9). Similar to the sideways smiley face “:-)”, the vertical smiley face ^^ represents the arched eyebrows of a smiling face. In this example, Roger's smiley face was used as a tone softener. According to Brown & Levinson (1978),

apologies are face-threatening to the speaker's positive face because, by making the apology, the speaker has admitted his/her misconduct. Following this trend of thought, Roger's apology can damage his own face. Thus, adding a smiley face could soften the seriousness of the apology and alleviate Roger's embarrassment at making the apology.

The presentation of a smiley face is not the only text-based emoticons used in the email correspondence. There are more emoticons which can be seen in relation to expressive acts. In the next example, I introduce the emoticon “:P” and its meaning in the context. Jane in pair 5 wrote to Helen to complain about a British man who broke up with her colleague. ‘I know most British people are nice and gentle, but this 45-year-old guy, might be an exception. :P’ (Jane, Pair 5). :P is an image of two eyes and a protruding tongue. In the data analysis, I discussed the point that the possible face-threat in Jane's criticism of the British man could have embarrassed Helen because she too was British. By adding a note to say that she did not mean to over-generalise the bad reputation of this particular British man to other British people, Jane had taken precautions against the possible misunderstanding entailed in her criticism. The emoticon used in her statement was a face with its tongue sticking out. The icon is usually used to indicate the writer's witty or naughty intention. It was argued in the data analysis that this emoticon was used along with Jane's comment in order to modify her tone. To mitigate the potential face-threat brought about by Jane's negative comment on this British man, Jane used the emoticon “:P” to soften her tone.

Above, I have shown how email, as an asynchronous form of communication, creates chances for more in-depth intercultural contacts. In addition, it seems clear that email, unlike face-to-face communication, is contextualised with electronic paralinguistic cues. Examples were given of electronic paralanguage being used to

facilitate the construction of sentence meaning in email. The written-out laughter and text presentations of facial expressions were used to enhance or attenuate the writer's tone in order to more precisely express his/her intended meaning.

#### **7.4 Final Remarks**

In 7.3, I have responded to the research questions, using the discussion of qualitative data collected in this thesis project. These qualitative data included email entries, e-journals and e-interviews. It has been shown that different computer-mediated features and linguistic devices were employed to attain different (im)politeness goals in the communicative events. In order to understand (im)politeness in email interaction, this thesis reinforces the point that semantic meaning does not always correspond to its pragmatic function. If this is so, the theoretical approaches of mapping utterances into speech act categories cannot satisfactorily capture meanings beyond the sentence level. This thesis argues that the meaning of a sentence should be understood from its context, rather than from its linguistic and syntactic representations, in particular, from the way in which the meaning of (im)politeness is negotiated between the interactants in the interactions.

In addition to the discussion of pragmatic functions of linguistic performance, the electronic paralinguistic cues, such as the emoticons and written-out laughter, have been further explored in relation to their discourse functions. Even though computer-mediated communication is usually considered a form of communication without nonverbal cues, it is shown in this study that the rhetorical function of the electronic paralanguage enriched the meaning transmission in email and, therefore enabled more in-depth intercultural understanding between the interactants.

The above discussion has shown that intercultural understanding via email is built on the meaning negotiations between individuals' interpersonal communication. Thus, Rather than seeing intercultural learning as received knowledge, with culture as a fixed and static concept, this thesis has sought to show that intercultural understanding is a construct which the interactants built (or failed to build) during their interactions. In this regard, interpersonal communication can contribute to cultural understanding. The meaning of culture is constantly (re)negotiated by different interactants in different contexts.

In the next chapter, I summarise the conclusions of this thesis, along with the research's limitations. The pedagogical implications concerning the use of email in intercultural communication will be addressed. Finally, future research directions will be suggested.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Final remarks**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter consists of three sections. In 8.2, each chapter in this thesis is represented by a brief synopsis. Following the summary, in 8.3, I discuss the limitations of this study and how they might be overcome. Finally, in 8.4, some conclusions are drawn alongside some suggestions for future research on intercultural email communication. Moreover, I want to show how the insights gained from this study contribute to pedagogical implications for foreign language education. Although this thesis does not explicitly aim to research the pedagogical implications, as it is a study of interaction in email exchange, I feel it is important not to miss the opportunities to do so.

#### **8.2 Summary of the thesis**

This thesis presented some ways in which polite or impolite meaning is negotiated in the intercultural email interaction. This paper considers issues such as the role of this particular mediating technology, the national background of participants and other identity factors. It shows how participants mediate (mis)understandings through email technology. In what follows, I summarise the content of each chapter in this thesis.

In Chapter 1, the research aims were stated. This study explored how intercultural understanding was developed in emails through the investigation of speech acts and (im)politeness strategies. Speech act theory was used to approach the discursive linguistic meaning in participants' emails. Theoretically inspired by Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, this study focused on the investigation of

(im)politeness strategies used in context in order to achieve the writer's communicative goals. The investigation of (im)politeness in context was important because it shed light on the way in which intercultural communication and understanding is a process of negotiation between interactants. It has been argued in this thesis that the meaning of (im)politeness is context-dependent. Building the theoretical frameworks of this study on the two theories, in Chapter 2, politeness theory and speech act theory were introduced. These two theories were essential to this study in that speech act theory was used to examine the linguistic performance of the email content, whereas politeness theory was used to discuss the pragmatic function of the act within the communicative event. Politeness theory and speech act theory were discussed in detail for both their contributions and inadequacies in the investigation of cross-cultural communication. It was pointed out in the discussion that the main criticism for the two theories is their lack of support from contextual references. Without taking the contextualised factors into consideration, both speech act theory and politeness theory encountered some difficulties in explaining the complexities of interactive behaviour. Thus, the two theories were taken a step further to investigate discursively the meaning construction and discursive negotiation in email interactions. This is to say, the determination of politeness or impoliteness should not be considered as an evaluation of the quality of the verbal performance, but as a process of meaning construction during the interaction. This thesis investigated speech acts in the context and interpreted the (im)politeness meanings of acts within the communicative events. I argued that the combined use of these two theoretical frameworks would provide a greater purchase on understanding intercultural communication via email.

Keeping close to the theoretical frameworks, the methodological structure of the

project was introduced in Chapter 3. In order to investigate data discursively, this study included a discussion of different qualitative data, such as a pre-survey questionnaire, email entries, e-journals and e-interviews. It was stated that, by investigating the qualitative data, this study aimed to explore how meaning was negotiated and understood during the email interactions. The speech acts used in emails were discussed in relation to their pragmatic functions in the context. In particular, this study explored how the interactants negotiated meaning and developed intercultural understanding by looking at the (im)politeness strategies used in the context. This research has provided a new theorisation of intercultural communication, (im)politeness and speech act by introducing the interdisciplinary framework of 'ethnographically-informed discourse study'. Ethnographically-informed discourse study, inspired by traditional ethnography, considers the challenges of ethnography research methods and introduces an interdisciplinary framework which is more appropriate for the investigation of online social activities. Ethnographically-informed discourse analysis considers email as a form of online social activity and discusses the meaning of email interaction by exploring the speech act and (im)politeness meaning within the communicative event. The linguistic and pragmatic analyses allow interactive and discursive insight into the understanding of meaning construction in email.

Nine Chinese speakers and nine English speakers were recruited for the purpose of this cultural and language exchange project. The participants exchanged emails for a period of 12 weeks. In order to conduct more contextualized investigations of speech acts and (im)politeness strategies, it was necessary to collect more qualitative data from the participants for a relatively long time. For this reason, the participants agreed, upon registering for this project, to send me a copy of all their emails and one

e-journal every week for 12 consecutive weeks. At the end of the project, e-interviews were administered on the participants. These qualitative data were used to triangulate and support the interpretive analysis. The theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study are presented in the chart below.

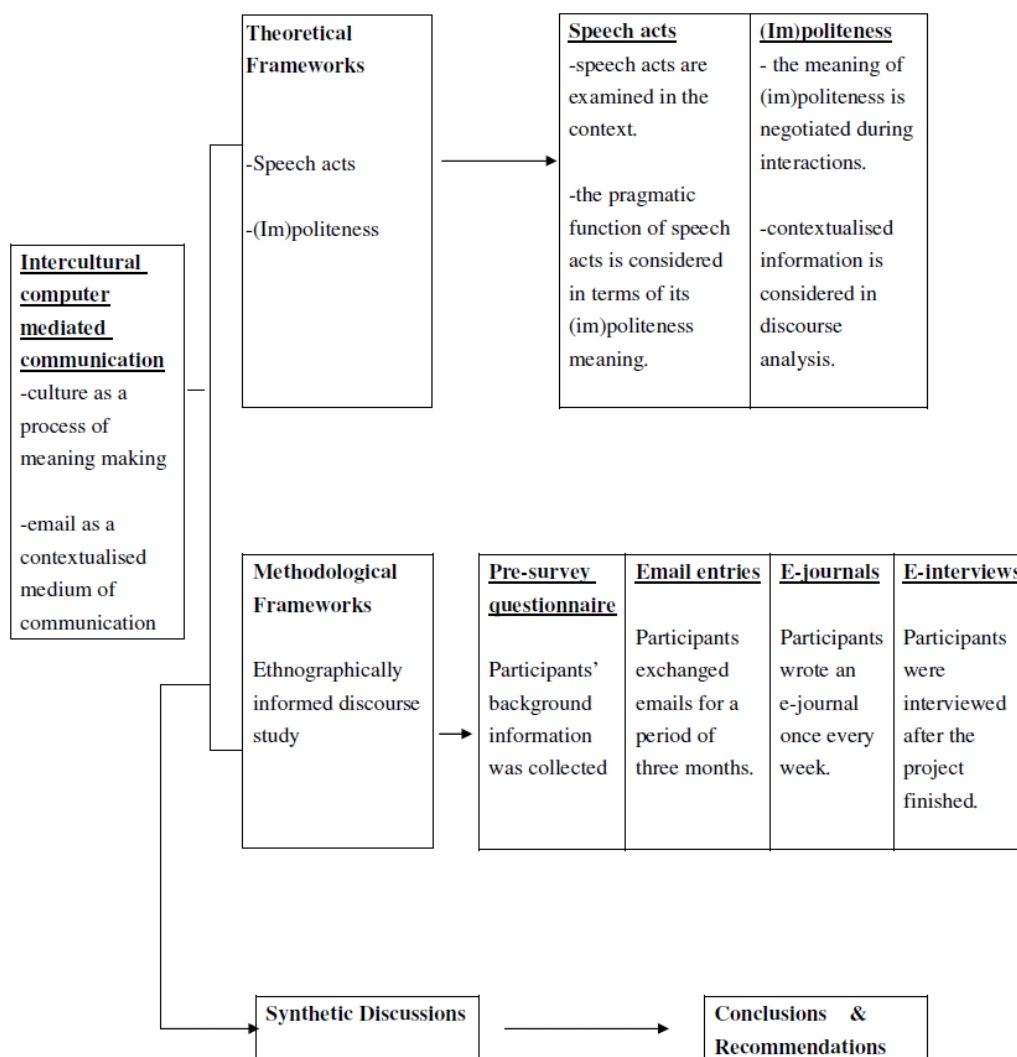


Figure 8.1: The theoretical and methodological frameworks of the research

Based on this research design, ethnographically informed discourse analysis was made of the email data collected from the nine pairs of participants. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I presented nine sets of data analysis, three in each chapter. The communicative



events which appeared to be salient in each pair were selected for in-depth analysis. In the linguistic part of the analyses, Searle's speech act taxonomies were employed for rudimentary investigation of the sentence's function from its linguistic form. Taking into account other contextual factors, the sentence's pragmatic function was then further discussed in terms of Brown & Levinson's positive and negative strategies.

It was concluded that the same meaning could be realised in different speech acts, and that the same speech act can perform different discourse functions. Thus, what appears to be linguistically impolite could be polite and appropriate in some contexts. This thesis has shown evidence to suggest that meaning should be interpreted along with contextualised factors, such as topics, relationships and communicative norm. The analysis of data has shown that linguistic politeness is not always the same as its pragmatic function. Using Brown & Levinson's politeness theory as a fundamental framework for analysing data, this thesis has proposed that rather than seeing politeness theory in terms of face-saving strategies for the hearer's face need, the theory would be better informed if the strategies were discussed as the negotiation of face needs between the interactants. In this case, strategies are used to maintain their own or their e-pals' face need and they can be used to support or attack faces. This argument was derived from the discursive observations from the participants' email interactions in which the participants were not only interested in their e-pals' face need, but also concerned about their own face (see Chapter 4,5,6). These examples indicated that the meaning of (im)politeness was not an absolute concept. Instead, (im)politeness should be perceived as the evaluation of an act based on the collective knowledge/experience which the participants gained from their interactions. In this sense, the determination of politeness or impoliteness is context-dependent.

This statement highlights the importance of contextualisation cues (see Gumperz,

1971), which then led to another crucial component in the email context: electronic paralinguage. As revealed in the data analysis, the transmission of (im)politeness meaning in email was supported by the electronic paralinguage (i.e. a smiley face was used to strengthen or modify the writer's tone). This observation from the participants' email correspondence has further confirmed the main argument of this thesis, which concerns the contextualising of (im)politeness meaning in emails. Without taking into consideration such electronic paralinguistic cues, it would be presumptuous to evaluate the writer's intent by words alone. This view conforms to Coulmas' argument that "[i]t is with respect to specific conditions that speakers and their utterances are perceived and assessed as polite, vulgar, disrespectful, ill-mannered, unseemly or rude" (Coulmas, 2005: 87). Thus, in addition to the linguistic investigation in emails, this study also highlighted the interplay between the electronic paralinguistic cues, the participants' linguistic displays and their pragmatic effects. The contextualised investigations of the meaning of (im)politeness in emails allowed the complexities of intercultural understanding to be explained in their own terms. This could mean that the intercultural communication in email is embodied through the interchange of views conveyed in verbal and non-verbal displays.

Based in part on the discussion of the data analysis and some additional references from the e-journals and e-interviews, in Chapter 7, I turned to the research questions. During the discussion, expressive speech acts were pinpointed for their prevalence in the participants' email correspondence and their multi-faced functions and linguistic presentations in constructing meanings. It was argued that the embedded meaning of a sentence was more complex than the speech act taxonomies could account for. It was also pointed out that there were no absolute correlations between certain speech acts and their communicative effects. This conclusive remark

is supported by Spencer-Oatey (1992), who highlights the importance of context when determining the appropriateness of a message. This thesis has considered intercultural communication as a process of interactive meaning negotiation between the interactants, rather than mere comprehension of what has been uttered or written. It has been further pointed out that although the asynchronous nature of email allows sufficient time and space for people to express their opinions, it does not promise mutual understanding. The key to the development of intercultural understanding in email communication may be the meaning negotiation between the interactants utilising the contextualised (im)politeness strategies.

Following the summary of every chapter in this thesis, I turn to discuss the limitations of the study.

### **8.3 Limitations of the study**

This thesis was motivated by a desire to understand how Chinese and English speakers develop interpersonal and intercultural understanding via emails. This involved investigation of the participants' backgrounds, email content, participants' feedback and comment on certain aspects of their interactions, etc. While rich data were obtained and in-depth data analysis was conducted, there are three general limitations of this thesis which need to be addressed in order to provide opportunities for future research.

#### **a. Limitation entailed from the considerations of the participants**

The time issue was closely related to the project participants' recruitment. As mentioned in Chapter 1, email has not been very much investigated because of the difficulties in accessing people's private emails. Thus, recruiting my participants was

a real challenge. In order to attract people's interest in taking part in this project, I needed to think both from a researcher's perspective and from a participant's. As a researcher, I hoped to collect rich data from my participants so I wanted them to devote as much time and effort as they could to this project. Yet if I had been a participant, I might not have wished the project to become onerous. Thus, the determination of how long the project should operate became a critical issue. If the project was too long, it might become a burden on people who were already busy. Recruitment could thus become even more difficult. Yet if the project was too short, it was difficult to see how the participants' mutual understanding and interpersonal relationship could develop. Eventually, I decided that three months should be sufficient for me to have enough observations on the participants' interactions, but not too long for the participants' to be tired of being 'watched' all the time.

However, it turned out that three months still provided only a limited chance to observe the participants' interactions to different kinds of topic. Since the participants did not know their e-pals before this project, they spent most of their time trying to get to know each other. There were many exchanges and much sharing of details of their daily lives. Thus, the analysis has focused on exchanges about the participants' life experiences. However, if the project could have operated longer, it might have been possible to find how the choices of topics, language use and the interpersonal relationship developed or changed further as time passed.

b. The numbers of the research participants

Another constraint of this study was the limited number of participants. The difficulty in having more participants was mainly due to the qualitative research paradigm chosen for this study. The orientation of this thesis was qualitative. The

research questions of this thesis orient the research design toward qualitative investigation, which aims to gain in-depth and thorough explanations for the performance of social acts in email correspondence. I believe that the knowledge of interpersonal communication can be better informed through qualitative investigation because such an orientation provides more in-depth and thorough explanations for the performance of social acts. In this ethnographically-informed discourse study, it was essential to keep track of every participant's emails and immerse myself in the development of their relationship. Through close observation of the participants' emails, e-journals and interview, rich data were drawn from the nine pairs and some useful insights were gained from observing their interactions. Since I am the only investigator in this project, it would have been difficult to pay equal and sufficient attention to each pair if there had been too many participants. For this reason, nine pairs only were considered sufficient to ensure in-depth investigation. Nevertheless, the investigations on the nine pairs are not sufficient to generalise assumptions or develop theories. For instance, even though the gender factor appeared to play a role in some of the participants' interactions, there is not enough evidence to strongly support any claim about the influence of gender in email communication. Yet, even though the generalisability of this study may be limited, I believe that it still reflects certain typical situations in the intercultural communication by email. The observations of this study also support the contextualised view of computer-mediated communication.

The study attempts to understand intercultural communication via email through its investigation of the nine pairs of Chinese and English speaking participants. For future studies, I am confident that the context-dependent

investigations on greater numbers of participants from diverse backgrounds could provide even profound understanding of intercultural communication.

c. Researcher's role in the email project

During the 12 weeks of email project, there were some technical problems in the email exchanges which required my intervention. My mediation of the problems was required mainly to deal with two problems: a) missing emails and b) indecipherable code, due to the use of different language systems.

i) Missing emails

There were times when emails went missing for unknown reasons. For instance Andy from pair 8 wrote in his week 8 email, 'Wow...I sent 2 or 3 emails to you last week (cc to Sharon) ... Didn't you receive them?' Since it is always difficult for both participants to tell whether their emails have gone missing or their e-pals have simply had no time to reply their emails, sometimes I needed to intervene to assist them with this situation. For example, Eve (pair 4) sent an email to her e-pal-May and me. Without hearing from May for some time, I suspected that May had not received the email. Thus, I forwarded Eve's email to May again. May wrote in her reply: 'I didn't get your last email until Sharon sent a copy to me. Because you once mentioned that you wouldn't reply for a while, I didn't wonder why I didn't get email from you for the past few days' (May's 10<sup>th</sup> week email). These are examples when the missing email situation was apparent (participants did not respond for quite some time) and the problem was solved in time. However, there were times when the problems were not quickly noticed and the participants sometimes got impatient while waiting for their e-pals' reply. Sherry (pair 3) wrote in her week 12 email: "Wondering if I missed ur email again.. Haven't heard from u for some times.. I don't know whether u would think it's too frequent to write to each other twice a week. But I think it's required for

this project.. no offence.” It could be seen that Sherry was confused about whether her e-pal had sent the email or not. This interference of the technical problem has inevitably had some impact on the email correspondence.

Even though emails went missing between some pairs, I argue that this phenomenon should be regarded as one typical facet of email interaction. The impacts made by from missing email should also be considered in the light of the participants’ negotiation of missing emails and their interpretation of the missing emails. Thus, the problem of missing email should be investigated as part of their email interaction.

ii) Indecipherable code due to the different language systems

The participants wished to have the opportunity presented by this intercultural communication project to have cultural and language exchanges with a native speaker of a foreign language. Even though most of the participants mainly used English to write to each other, there were still times when the participants tried to compose Chinese words in their emails. However, due to the different language system installed in the English and Chinese versions of computers, many participants’ Chinese words became indecipherable when the words appeared in their e-pals’ computers. For example, Sherry wrote in her email: ‘I can’t read ur letter. trouble with the language code. I tried to change it bt it didn’t work.’ (Sherry’s week 7 email). Another example can be found from pair 5. Jane wrote to her e-pal Helen: ‘I can’t recognize the Chinese characters you’ve typed when you expressed your condolence to my friend’s death and when you said you attended a wedding and got two things. I’ve tried to “decode” them but failed. :P’ (Jane’s 5<sup>th</sup> week email). Helen replied in her email :‘I know that you will probably not be able to receive the chinese characters correctly, so I have again saved them as a .jpeg file attached to this email for you. I

hope it is useful! :)’ (Helen’s 6<sup>th</sup> week email) This technical problem has seriously hampered the use of Chinese words across all email sets and may have resulted in the loss of some valuable data. In future research, this language problem could be solved if all the participants were asked to install the same language system. Having a unified system installed in the participants’ computers would then avoid possible conflict or inconsistency between different language systems. This proposed solution for technical issues is discussed further below among the implications for teaching language and culture.

#### **8.4 Implications for teaching language and culture**

Kramsch states, “[l]anguage use is a cultural act not only because it reflects the ways in which one individual acts on another individual through such speech acts as thanking, greeting, complimenting, that are variously accomplished in various cultures. Language use is a cultural act because its users co-construct the very social roles that define them as members of a discourse community” (Kramsch, 1998: 35). She rightly points out the importance of seeing culture as a developing and changeable concept which is created by the people involved in a community. The ability to create, recognise and respect a different ‘culture’ is considered an index of intercultural competence. This is my view that this intercultural communication competence is learned, shaped and developed during negotiation between interactants. The process of meaning negotiation, knowledge exchanges and the development of a relationship can all serve the purpose of equipping a competent intercultural communicator.

Email intercultural communication, as argued in this thesis, is rich in contextualised meaning and should be regarded as a valuable resource for teaching



language and culture. Even though Sproull and Kiesler (1986) have argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) lacks “social context cues” and, therefore allows more uninhibited communication, there are still aspects of CMC which are similar to face-to-face (FTF) communication. Walther et al (1994:465) argue that “[t]he exchange of social information in CMC may be slower than FTF but it is potentially just as potent over time.” Their statement implies that, when given adequate time for communication, the relational patterns which emerge in computer-mediated communication will be similar to those which appear in face-to-face communication. Similarly, Fulk et al (1990:120) observes that, like FTF, people also use email to carry out highly interpersonal interactions, such as conflict resolution and negotiation. This view of email can be further confirmed in this thesis. As discussed previously, this thesis has shown in the data analysis that there is evidence of negotiation of (im)politeness meaning in email intercultural communication. Helen (pair 5) reflected on her email interactions with her e-pal: “I have noticed that both my own and my e-pal’s styles in writing emails have changed over the past few months. Writing styles are more relaxed and become slightly informal, this includes using emoticons and lots of exaggerated punctuation such as exclamation marks” (Helen’s week, 12<sup>th</sup> e-journal). It can be seen that Helen had become aware of the contextualized cues in her writing, namely, the informal writing style, emoticons and exaggerated emphasis from the choice of punctuation. Through the process, Helen formed an understanding of the pragmatic meanings entailed in the use of emoticons or informal writing style and applied them in her emails to facilitate communication with her e-pal. I argue that this learning process, which emerged in her email interactions with her e-pal, signifies the development of intercultural communication competence.

Through the process of actual interactions, interactants from different national backgrounds could become aware of the complexity of communication. Based on the real experience interactions, they could challenge or support their own assumptions about other cultures and possibly be more tolerant of differences. This interactive meaning construction view conforms to the main argument of this thesis: that the meaning of (im)politeness was negotiated by the participants in their interactions. Kramsch (1998:26) also highlights the role of interactive meaning construction. She suggests that “the semantic meanings of verbal signs had to be supplemented by the pragmatic meanings of verbal actions in context.” In addition, she points out that linguistic performance is inadequate to explain meaning fully. It is only through the investigation of “why they said what they said and how they said it to whom in a specific context of situation” that one accurately construes meaning in interactions.

All in all, this view of the contextualisation of language learning pinpoints the pedagogical role of email in nurturing a language learner’s intercultural communication competence. The intercultural communication via email can be seen as a reciprocal process of interaction which includes initiating the communication with another person, collecting knowledge about the other person’s background via email interactions, making appropriate responses (whether polite or impolite) based on the accumulated knowledge from the past email correspondence and then making alterations or (re)negotiating meaning for the next interaction. Hyland refers to the meaning negotiation from the interaction as ‘metadiscourse’. He defines ‘metadiscourse’ as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland 2005a: 46). He argues that there are three advantages for introducing metadiscourse

features to language learners: “First, it helps them to better understand the cognitive demands that texts make on readers and the ways writers can assist them to process information. Second, it provides them with the resources to express a stance towards their statements. Third, it allows them to negotiate this stance and engage in a community-appropriate dialogue with readers” (ibid.: 178). This view of Hyland’s underlines the interactive role of the language learner in the process of language learning. Agreeing with Hyland’s assertion, this research also found that the participants’ acts of negotiation of intercultural understanding and the developing of agreement on appropriate email behaviour all seem to indicate that the participants are themselves discourse analysts. The participants initiated interactions, developed interpersonal understanding and formed norms of communication based on their interactions. From the accumulated knowledge of their interactions, the participants then evaluated and interpreted the meaning in their e-pals’ emails.

In my view, this email interactive process is a critical approach for language and cultural learning. This view is supported by Ma (1993, 1994), who points out that international e-mail communication brings three effects to students: 1) participants become better-informed about each other’s culture; 2) participants disclose more than they do in face-to-face situations; and 3) the e-mail communication situation is perceived to be more informational. Ma’s view draws attention to the important role of email in encouraging language learners to be actively involved in meaning formation. This research has shown that the interactants make use of the contextualisation cues in their email interactions to negotiate meaning and develop intercultural understanding.

Hence, in the light of the discussion and insights gained from this study, I propose that email intercultural communication should be considered in the language

classroom curriculum in Taiwan. It can be done by inviting intercultural exchanges between a Taiwanese class and a class from the UK or the US, pairing individual students with one another. The experience of technical problems encountered in this study prompts the advice that both groups of participants should install the same language software, to avoid problems of indecipherable words.

The email exchanges between students should be private, to allow more unconstrained and not interfered exchanges. Norton (2000) also proposes that second language learners need the opportunity to use their own experience as the basis for improving their language proficiency. Hence, my view is that their intercultural communication experience would allow language learners to “link their words, beliefs and mindsets to a larger context of culture” (Kramsch, 1998:26). Rather than seeing meaning and values as items of static knowledge, the situated learning mediated by computers would instead allow learners to construct and reflect the meaning in actual interactions. In this case, teachers would become facilitators or mediators during the process of the learners’ interactions. However, for teaching and learning purposes, students should share their thoughts about their intercultural communication with their teachers via emails every one to two weeks. The views gathered from the students could then be anonymously shared with the rest of the class at the end of the term.

In addition, I propose that intercultural communication should not focus only on the exchanges between students. Teachers in both groups should also email one another and share feedback, for I think that intercultural awareness is not important to language learners alone, but is also critical for language teachers. I argue that teachers who wish to teach culture should equip themselves with intercultural communication experiences. In other words, teachers, like their students, should be ready for a changing and interactive learning environment. Atkinson (2002: 538) states, “If, as

second language teachers, we can harness more of the range of teaching situations that actually take place in the world outside the classroom (e.g., Atkinson, 1997, 1998; Hawkins, 1998), then we will be able to utilize more fully the teaching and learning potential of all human beings.” Agreeing with Atkinson’s contention, I assert that both language learners and teachers could benefit from the rich dynamic of email intercultural communication and gain more intercultural awareness from the experience.

### **8.5 Conclusions**

The prevalence of computer-mediated communication these days has increased the contacts between people from different countries and backgrounds. Naturally, the intercultural communication in the virtual world has begun to attract the attention of many researchers, of whom I am one. Specifically, this study focuses on the analysis of (im)politeness meaning during intercultural communication. Locher (2004:91) suggests that “[p]oliteness cannot be investigated without looking in detail at the context, the speakers, the situation and the evoked norms.” Bearing this in mind, this thesis draws on conceptualisations from the linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes’ communicative event. I view the communicative meaning of an act as influenced by the context in which the act is performed. It has been made the focus of this study’s analyses that the contextualised information, such as participants’ backgrounds, topics, interpersonal relationships, and computer-mediated features, could feed into the understanding of meaning in the recorded email interactions. It has been concluded in the study that: 1) the meaning of (im)politeness is context-dependent; 2) speech act forces should not be determined by their linguistic forms (e.g. apologies are not always made to express regret; 3) computer-mediated features (i.e. emoticons, written

out laughter, eccentric spelling, variations of typography) are used to assist meaning construction. They can be used to accentuate or attenuate the tone of the writer; and 4) intercultural understanding is (re)negotiated in interpersonal communication.

I have detailed the meaning negotiation via computer-mediated communication between the Chinese- and English-speaking participants in this study. In particular, this thesis has investigated the (im)politeness meaning in context. The previous section has commented on the sorts of barriers and limitations that the study has encountered. Despite the limitations, the insights gained from this study are valuable.

The study has introduced intercultural communication as an interdisciplinary study and integrated different research methods in order to unpack the process of intercultural meaning negotiation in email. The research has revealed the pedagogic potential of using email in EFL. It is found that email allows culture to be understood as a process of meaning negotiation, rather than a received, static concept. It has also shed light on the interplay between speech acts, (im)politeness and computer-mediated communication (email). It demonstrates that the contextualised factors (e.g. topics, interpersonal relationship, communicative norms, age, etc.) can not only shape the writer's language use and (im)politeness meaning, but also affect the recipient's understanding of the message.

Kramsch (1998:31) also states, “[t]he study of contextualisation cues not only brings to light the way in which speakers give pragmatic coherence to their respective utterances; it also gives us a hint at the way participants in verbal interactions co-construct cultural roles for themselves while they co-operatively construct the topic of the conversation.” Agreeing with Kramsch's view, I consider that presuppositions about cultural, gender or age differences run the risk of oversimplifying the essence of intercultural communication. It has been argued that,

in email communication, people carry their knowledge, language and thought to their computer-mediated contacts and vary their use in emails (i.e. compliant letters to banks, greetings to a friend). As seen in the analyses in the previous chapter, many participants of this study used electronic paralanguage (e.g. a smiley face) to express feelings, ideas and opinions. Computer-mediated communication has, to an extent, shaped our language use. In this regard, people influence and interact with technologies and vice versa. This practical view of language has granted computer-mediated communication a role in language education.

This research also urges the need to consider the role of emoticons as a future innovative communication system due to the increasing dependency on computer-mediated communication in today's society. In response to the trend, language education should be encouraged to keep up with the dynamics and hybrid nature of computer-mediated communication. In this endeavour, this thesis has explored how the interactants developed intercultural understanding and negotiated the (im)politeness meanings in their emails. It has highlighted the finding that the electronic paralinguistic cues could be used to realise meaning in the context and influence the intercultural communication. This thesis contends, then, that the intercultural communication via email, which is enriched with its own contextualisation cues, as face-to-face communication is, could bring the knowledge of language and culture to a new level of understanding. Thus, this potential of email communication in language education should not be ignored. The insights gained from this thesis do not apply merely to the understanding of language use in email, but also highlight the pedagogical importance of computer-mediated communication in language education. Hawisher and Moran (1993) stress that "we need to build email into our discipline because in the future there will be more, not less, electronic

communication. E-mail, we believe, deserves a place in the curriculum” (Hawisher & Moran, 1993:643). On the same grounds, this thesis also proposes that intercultural communication via email, which could stimulate more critical thinking about language and communication, should be included in the language classroom curriculum. The pedagogical values of email intercultural communication have been discussed in detail in the previous section. I have suggested that email interactants are ethnographers and discourse analysts themselves, who discover and make sense out of the cultural information in their email intercultural communication.

The investigation of this research has shown that culture should be understood as a concept with different layers, which consists of large and small cultures (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of large and small cultures). It is suggested that, through the process of (re)negotiation of meanings in the interactions, one can begin to understand how the large culture interacts and interweaves with the small culture. Essentially, this is to stress that culture should not be taken as an absolute concept. This statement is particularly true in the online environment. Ess and Sudweeks (2005) also urge the need to see “‘culture’ as something fluid and dynamic, in part precisely because ‘culture’ is constructed out of our online intercultural encounters.” This view of intercultural communication could invite more critical thoughts about nationality-based ideas of culture and allow culture to be seen from different dimensions.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a future research direction for email intercultural communication. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to perform elaborate analysis on paralinguistic cues and distinguish the pragmatic meaning between animated cues (😊), typographic display ( :)) and the different social/cultural values indicated by the use of vertical (^\_^) and horizontal faces ( :)) , I suggest that



more research attention should be given to exploring the role of electronic paralanguage in intercultural communication. This thesis has shown that the paralinguistic cues used in the participants' email may function not only to assist the linguistic meanings. The decision to apply certain paralinguistic features rather than others could also indicate the influence of socially determined preferences or the idiosyncrasy of the writer. Walther argues that "interaction coding that does not consider nonverbal behaviour may miss as much as two thirds of the meaning in any social interaction in which such cues are present" (Walther,1992:63). Similarly, I believe that further investigation on the use of electronic paralinguistic cues in email would enable more contextualised understanding of email intercultural communication.

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## Appendix 1

### Recruitment notice for Chinese speakers

#### **“Volunteers wanted”**

Dear all,

My name is Shin-Chieh Hsieh (Sharon). I am a research student at the University of Birmingham in U.K. My research interests are in language and cultural learning. Recently, I started working on a project about how native speakers of Taiwanese and English negotiate meaning through the use of e-mail. By doing so, I hope to gain more insights into intercultural communication. I sincerely hope that you can take part in this interesting, lively and exciting project and discover more about languages and cultures. My plan is the following.

Brief introduction of the project:

1. Time: August, 2006 till October, 2006
2. Who: Taiwanese students who major in English. Both male and female are welcomed.
3. How: E-mail correspondence with the native speakers of English one to two times a week for three months. Please note that you will need to send a copy to the researcher of your each email correspondence.
4. Procedure:
  - a) An icebreaker will be provided by the researcher as a prompt to start the e-mail correspondence in the first week. Afterward participants can talk about any topics they wish in their e-mails.
  - b) In order to know more about individuals' feelings and thoughts about this e-mail project, participants will be asked to write down a reflective journal once every week.
5. Benefits:
  - a) It is a great opportunity for you to make friends with people from other countries.
  - b) You can learn more about your epal's cultures.
  - c) You can practice using English with the native speakers of the language.
  - d) Experience being part of a research that is intended to help more language learners like you and me.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message. If you are interested in joining the project, please do not hesitate to contact me. My e-mail address is [emailme2006@gmail.com](mailto:emailme2006@gmail.com)

Look forward to hearing from you soon! ☺

#### **Background information:**

1. You will be asked to fill out a pre-survey questionnaire and three short interactive e-mail role plays during the project.
2. E-mail each other one to two times a week.
3. If you prefer to keep your personal email account private, the researcher will help by setting up a new email account for you to use in this project.
4. You will need to send the researcher a copy of your every email to your epal.



5. Please send a reflective journal to the researcher every week. You can write about anything in your journal. The journal does not have to be long, and it can be written in Chinese or English.
6. Respond to your epal's emails as soon as possible.
7. You can write about any topics to your epal in your emails.
8. During the project, the researcher will help if any technical assistance is needed.
9. The researcher will quote your sentences or words in the email correspondence for the purpose of research analysis. However, your real names will not be shown in the paper.
10. Please do not hesitate to contact the researcher anytime if you have any problems during the e-mail correspondence. ([emailme2006@gmail.com](mailto:emailme2006@gmail.com))

## Appendix 2

### Recruitment notice for English speakers

#### **Volunteers wanted!** **Enhance your intercultural knowledge with us!**

Dear all,

My name is Shin-Chieh Hsieh (Sharon). I am a research student at the University of Birmingham in U.K. My research interests are in language and cultural learning. Recently, I started working on a project about how native speakers of English and Chinese negotiate meaning through the use of e-mail. By doing so, I hope to gain more insights into intercultural communication. I sincerely hope that you can take part in this interesting, lively and exciting project and discover more about languages and cultures. My plan is the following.

#### **Brief introduction of the project:**

1. Time: August, 2006 till October, 2006
2. Who: **native speakers of English**. Both male and female are welcomed.
3. How: E-mail correspondence with students in Taiwan one to two times a week for three months. Please note that you will need to send a copy to the researcher of your each e-mail correspondence.
4. Procedure:
  - a) An icebreaker will be provided by the researcher as a prompt to start the e-mail correspondence in the first week. Afterward participants can talk about any topics they wish in their emails.
  - b) In order to know more about individuals' feelings and thoughts about this e-mail project, participants will be asked to write down a reflective journal once every week.
5. Benefits:
  - c) It is a great opportunity for you to make friends with people from other countries.
  - d) You can learn more about your epal's cultures.
  - e) You can use this chance to learn Chinese or to practicing using Chinese if you already know the language. (Please note that you don't necessarily have to write to your epals in Chinese.)
  - f) Experience being part of a research that is intended to help more language learners like you and me.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message. If you are interested in joining the project, please do not hesitate to contact me. My e-mail address is [emailme2006@gmail.com](mailto:emailme2006@gmail.com)

Look forward to hearing from you soon! ☺

#### **Background information:**

1. You will be asked to fill out a pre-survey questionnaire and take part in three short interactive e-mail role plays during the project.
2. E-mail each other one to two times a week.
3. If you prefer to keep your personal email account private, the researcher will help

by setting up a new email account for you to use in this project.

4. You will need to send the researcher a copy of your every email to your epal.

5. Send a reflective journal to the researcher every week. You can write about anything in your journal. The journal does not have to be long, and it can be written in Chinese or English.

6. Respond to your epal's emails as soon as possible.

7. You can write about any topics to your epal in your emails.

8. During the project, the researcher will help if any technical assistance is needed.

9. The researcher will quote your sentences or words in the email correspondence for the purpose of research analysis. However, your real names will not be shown in the paper.

10. Please do not hesitate to contact the researcher anytime if you have any problems during the e-mail correspondence. ([emailme2006@gmail.com](mailto:emailme2006@gmail.com))

**Appendix 3**  
**Informed consent form**

**STUDY PURPOSE:**

You are invited to participate in a research study, entitled **“Exploring the process of speech act performance in email correspondence: how native speakers of Chinese and English negotiate meanings.”** The purpose of this study is to explore intercultural communication by using email system. If you agree to participate, you will be one of the approximately eighteen subjects who will be participating in this research. I anticipate that your participation in this study will take three months.

**PROCEDURE FOR THE STUDY:**

1. A greeting email with a hypothetical situation question will be sent to you and your epal in the beginning by the researcher. Your counterpart will be randomly assigned by the researcher.
2. Use the “reply all” icon to respond your emails since you will then include the researcher in your reply emails. You can choose to answer the researcher’s question in the first email to start your email correspondence, or you can write about anything you prefer. The researcher will not interfere once you have started emailing each other, unless it is necessary.
3. Respond to your epal’s email as soon as possible since the time differences between you and your epals’ countries will already cause the delay of your reply.
4. Email your epal one to two times a week.
5. Send the researcher an e-journal at the end of each week. You can write about your feelings, suggestions, or anything in the journal. Example: I am very busy this week so I didn’t check my emails everyday. I hope my epal wouldn’t mind receiving my delay reply. My epal seems like a very easygoing person. So far we don’t have any trouble communicating. There are no restrictions toward the length of your journal. The journal can be composed in either Chinese or English. The researcher will send you a reminder of the journal every Friday.
6. Two short situational contexts will be sent to you by email. The context will include simulated situations and you will write down your responses toward the given situations.
7. You will be invited to give feedback on the whole project. You will be invited to give feedback on the whole project.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Your participation of the project is voluntary. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any obligations. However, if you wish to cease your participation, you will need to notify the researcher upon your request to withdraw. All of your previous email entries will be destroyed when you are no longer the participant in the project.

If you choose to participate, your email correspondence with your epal will be strictly confidential. Because this study involves the analysis of language use, your email entries will be used to investigate the target focus of the study. Your words may be quoted by the researchers for the research purposes, but, your real name will not be revealed.

**BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH:**

- a) It is a great opportunity for you to make friends with people from other countries.
- b) You can learn more about your epal's cultures.
- c) You can practice using Chinese/ English with the native speakers of the language.
- d) An experience to be part of a research that is intended to inform more language learners like you and me.

**CONTACT:**

During the project, if you have any questions or problems you may contact the researcher Shin-Chieh Hsieh (Sharon).

**Ph. D. student Shin-Chieh Hsieh**

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**School Email:** emailme2006@gmail.com

If you are willing to participate in this study after reading the content, please check the box on the right. ☐

Please sign here to confirm you have read the content. \_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4

### Pre-survey questionnaire

Pre-survey questionnaire	
Name	
Age	62
Gender	male
Occupation	Real estate mgt
Nationality	American (Texan)
School name and major(s) of your current or highest degree	Univ North Texas, B.A.-Government
A summary of the finding will be sent to all participants in the end. Please specify a valid mailing address	
Years of learning Chinese/ English	3, studying alone
Do you speak any other languages? If yes, what language(s)?	No
Is this your first time having epals from foreign countries? If you have epals before, what do you find most interesting about your previous epal's country and your epal(s)? (Please skip this question if you have no previous experience.)	No. Exchange of perspective on world events, life.
Do you have friends from other countries? If yes, please indicate the nationalities of your friends.	China, Taiwan, S. Korea, Mexico
Please describe the reason(s) that you want to join this project.	cultural exchange & learn a bit more about mandarin
Do you use e-mail to contact or communicate with people? If yes, with whom?	yes, friends, newspapers, blogs, chat boards
What languages do you usually write in your e-mails?	English
How often do you check your e-mails?	everyday
What would you like to know more about your epal's country from this project?	relationship norms, what does friendship mean-- (does it impose obligations, if so what are they?) define deception-a lie--is it acceptable to deceive for the sake of diplomacy; what is the diet? is it loaded with carbohydrates? what is the incidence of diabetes, heart disease, etc.? If my epal lives under an authoritarian government, does the family create some private language to avoid political risks? What about pollution and protecting the environment? Transportation? Automobiles? Public safety of pedestrians and automobile drivers?
If you are a native speaker of Chinese, have you been to any English speaking countries before? If yes, please indicate which country/ countries and what do you like about the country/countries.	No.
If you are a native speaker of English, have you been to any Chinese speaking countries before? If yes, please indicate which country/ countries and what do you like about the country/countries.	
This project will start from August till October. Will the schedule of the project present any difficulties for you?	No
Would you like the researcher to set up a new e-mail account for you to use in this project?	Yes
Please use a few words to describe yourself. This information will help the researcher to pair you up with another participant.	Diplomatic but direct. Prefer someone who seeks truth, even if it not what they prefer to learn. Not sensitive to criticism.

## **Appendix 5**

### **Discourse completion test as an icebreaker**

Dear all,

Welcome you all to join the project. First of all I would like to thank you for taking part in this intercultural communication project. This project will officially start from today, 7 August, 06 for three months. Before starting the email correspondence, there are a couple of things that I would like to remind you.

1. Please respond to your epal's emails as soon as possible as everyone will be expected to write to their epals at least one to two emails per week.
2. Please remember to include Sharon in your each email correspondence. ([emailme2006@gmail.com](mailto:emailme2006@gmail.com)). You can simply click on "reply all" from this email to include me in your mailing list.
3. Please be aware of the time difference between you and your epal's country. (East coast of US is 12 hours behind Taiwan ) (West coast of US is 15 hours behind Taiwan ) ( UK is 7 hours behind Taiwan )
4. Please remember to send Sharon a journal every weekend. There is no restrictions toward the content and the length of the journal. You can write in either Chinese or English.
5. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any problems during the email correspondence.

As mentioned in the research procedures, an icebreaker is provided below. You can choose to discuss the situation with your epal or you can choose to write your own topics. I would like to suggest you to start by introducing a little bit of yourself to your epal.

Thank you again for joining the project. I hope this will be a pleasant experience for all of us.

### **Icebreaker**

Situation:

You are having an important test in a couple of days. Your friend came to you to borrow the notes for the test. What would you say to your friend?

Have a good day ! :)

Best wishes,  
Sharon

## **Appendix 6**

### **Examples of e-journals**

#### **Keith's e-journals:**

##### **Week 1**

One interesting observation: penpal Ed (Xue1 Jun4 Yan4) We both drew from our personal experiences how we would handle the situation. But, we would both like to find ways to help a friend.

##### **Week 2**

Penpal, Ed, is a direct, caring person who is very busy.

##### **Week 3**

Ed was apparently too busy to respond to both my emails this week. If someone in Taiwan loses his/her English email partner, I would be happy to also correspond with them for cultural exchange.

##### **Week 4**

Ed and I exchanged views on how friendship is defined/viewed in our respective cultures. While we expressed ourselves differently, I do not see much difference in the two cultural views of friendship.

We also talked about migration from the mainland to Taiwan and from mainland China to the U.S. We are in agreement that the "Cultural Revolution" was really disturbing to traditional Chinese culture, especially in how friendship is now viewed.

Re race: Ed asked me if I am black. I appreciate his directness. I shared some of my experiences/knowledge with respect to racism in the U.S. I would add an afterthought: Even though there will always be racism, today, it is often in the eye of the beholder.

Everyone fails at something. I fail at something everyday. Who do we blame? Ourselves? or is it easier for one's ego to believe that someone else discriminated on the basis of race or ethnicity, or ...? Political correctness fosters the latter just as American style liberalism chooses to shift blame from individual responsibility to society.

##### **Week5**

Ed and I exchanged an email re: the mandarin translation of "lady" when defined as a woman of good moral character and good manners. His term was shu2 niu3. I found the term shu1 nu3 in my BBK electronic translator.

I exchanged a couple of emails with Sharon and learned that Ed is having computer problems, that he sent an email which neither of us received and commented to her that running a project like this is somewhat like herding cats.

She, humorously, asked if I had any suggestions on how to do that. I replied that she should wear thick leather clothes and gloves and a face mask. Perhaps, the best



strategy is to get some fish and invite the cats to dinner, because herding cats is like trying to run water up hill without pressure or containment.

### **Week 6**

RE: imotive icons I use them with special friends who I think might appreciate them. Generally, I avoid using them because I am "old school". I go back to the days when the PC had very limited memory, there were no hard drives, and later when 14.4K dialup was considered fast.

Ed forwarded a copy of his week5 journal. I was suprised by his comments and I just now finished a response. I hope he will be provide specific illustrations of how Chinese friendship functions differently from that of Westerners.

### **Week 7**

Meaningful dialog is a two-way discipline. Due to language differences, especially in emphasis due to syntax, misunderstanding is likely. However, forthright exchange does tend to clarify expression even if it highlights the reality that friends agree to disagree. After all, in a cultural exchange, people are trained to see things differently and this is amplified by access to divergent news sources. This access can also be limited by the amount of time a person has to research issues.

It is therefore critical that questions posed be addressed. If a person does not have a response formulation, then it would be considerate to just say 'I need time to think about that' or 'I'll get back to you on that one when I have more time.'

### **Week 8**

Ed and I exchanged emails about whether democracy is compatible with Chinese culture. He does not appear to think so, but if it is possible, he feels the form it takes must be developed by the Chinese.

On the latter point, I would certainly concur and expect that if asked, President Bush would also agree, based on how the Iraqi system of government was formed. There, they wrote their own constitution, defined the rights of their citizens respecting their culture and traditions, and held their own elections--all in the very face of death.

The father of modern conservative thought, Sir Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, would agree with the notion that Chinese traditions and culture help to define the rights of Chinese. Therefore, it is logical that the Chinese would indeed need to develop their own system.

### **Week 9**

The way I gain insight into different cultures is through understanding the logic behind a particular practice or viewpoint. Cultural practices and beliefs are based on deeply held values and traditions. I fully expect them to be different from my own views and culture. However, through understanding, common threads can be identified which brings us closer, even if we are geographically far apart.

I had hoped that participation in this exchange would help me to better understand the Chinese people and their culture.

I have not gotten this benefit. I will be not be able to receive emails again before October 15.

## Appendix 7

### Examples of a complete e-interview

E-interview with Helen 10/02/2007

- 1. I have noticed that you and Jane constantly showed empathy or support toward the other person's feelings. For example, once Jane told you about her colleague whose boyfriend broke up with her for no good reason. You, in your week6 email, wrote that, "I completely empathise with your friend". Jackie then in her week7 email wrote, "I agree that western societies don't seem relationships as serious as asians do." By sharing feelings and agreeing with one another, did you think that it had brought you and Jackie closer?**

Ans: Yes. I feel that trying to understand another person's situations and feelings can help to progress a friendship or relationship as you feel you have something in common.

- 2. Did you feel that this kind of supportive interactions are common among female friends? Why or why not?**

Ans: Yes. Females have a tendency to express and share emotions and feelings more than men and I feel that women need that kind of support more than men.

- 3. If Jackie were a man, would you have done it differently when Jane told you about his friend's relationship problem?**

Ans: Probably not, but men and women often view relationships in different ways, therefore I think the support I offered would have been seen as more helpful to a female than to a male.

- 4. I've noticed that both you and Jane have used many emotive icons in your emails. Two of them were most frequently used- ";p" and ":)". Do you think that the preference in using particular emotive icons could be influence or reinforced by the interactants? Why or why not?**

Ans: Yes. The use of emotive icons such as ;p or :) would imply my epal was happy/smiling/laughing which often encourages me to smile/laugh too and use the same emotive icons in return.

- 5. Did you think that the use of these two emotive icons have positive effects on your relationship? Why or why not?**

Ans: Yes. Virtual interaction often leaves little room for expression of emotion and body language, which I feel, is important in a relationship. Emotive icons allow for some expression.

- 6. I've noticed that Jane sometimes used both ":)" and "^^" in her emails. For example in her week7 email, she wrote, "I'll be willing to be your tour guide ^^." and "I begin feeling excited about going back to uni just like you do :)" Did you feel that these two seemly similar faces have different meaning or usage?**

Ans: Personally, I think they mean the same and the 2 different emotive icons were used just for variation.

- 7. You stopped writing for almost two weeks since you moved back to school and had no access to the Internet because of the phone line problem. When you resumed your correspondence with Jackie, Jackie did not reply until a week later. Did you think that the responding time between emails would affect the development of your relationship? Why or why not?**

Ans: Yes, similar to a non-virtual relationship, if there has been a delay in correspondence then there tends to be a period where the relationship needs to be redeveloped.

- 8. If the responding time matters, how long did you consider as 'reasonable' or 'appropriate' responding time for you and your epal?**

**If the responding time does not matter to you, please explain why?**

Ans: I think at least 1 email a week would be reasonable, but often, many factors affect responding time such as, which stage of the relationship participants are at and how busy participants are.

- 9. In your week 12 journal, you mentioned that, "I feel it is a requirement to reply to an email of a similar length to the one that was received, therefore if I receive an extremely long email it puts me off replying as I feel I must also write a really long email." Did you think that it would be rude if you did not reply in a similar length?**

Ans: Yes. A long email often means it had involved a lot of thought and effort by my epal, I would feel I was being rude if I didn't place just as much effort into my reply.

- 10. On the contrary, would you be offended if you wrote a rather long email but received a short one in return? Why or why not?**

Ans: Possibly, it would depend on the content. From the email, I would probably be able to tell if my epal was busy, upset or not interested which would explain why an email was short.

## Appendix 8

### Example of the complete email correspondences

#### **Pair 1 Keith and Ed's emails:**

##### **Week 1**

Keith to Ed      09/08/2006

Ni hao,

Re: You are having an important test in a couple of days. Your friend came to you to borrow the notes for the test. What would you say to your friend?

A. It would depend on why he did not have his own notes to study. Was he sick for much of the course, etc? People should carry their own weight and part of that is preparing for the final exam...and that includes taking notes.

I would still help him/her as best I could, but I would not surrender my notes, on which I depend. I would tell him/her that I must first review my notes very thoroughly and if I was comfortable that I had command of the information, I would allow him/her access to the notes.

As an alternative, I might offer to scan the notes and email them or photocopy them, at his/her cost.

My name is Keith. I look forward to a direct and open exchange of perspectives.

I ask that you be direct. You will not hurt my feelings by what you write, or if you do, I will have forgotten the offending comment in short order. I look forward to developing a new friendship.

My mandarin is still poor; I know almost no hanzi. I know a little pinyin. Accordingly, I will write in English.. Otherwise, I might insult someone you care about without realizing what I said. I hope you will not be offended by my limitation in this regard.

Kindest wishes from Texas.

Keith

.....

Ed to Keith      10/08/2006

About the question, I think that I would say yes. Each student should take his (I assume that's a he) responsibility of the school work, but I think I should let the teachers to judge it. As his friend, I wouldn't mind to give him a hand if he was always absent from class but he wants to do something in the end of the term. In the other hand, if he always showed up at class but didn't make any note. That maybe because the teacher talked too fast in class (like mine), or he really isn't good at organizing what people say immediately.

Besides, I don't think lending somebody my note is a big deal. but I think the process of making notes makes people learned most. I don't think that someone always borrows notes from others would get the best grades. When I

was in university I always exchange notes with my classmates.(So it means I borrow note from classmates even I've already had my won one. ha ha! and I even have one of the note from my classmate in hand right now....)

I so agree with you in the last two line, let him to scan the note or give him pdf file is a great method.

My name is Ed (pinyin: Xue1 Jun4 Yan4) I live in Taiwan Taipei, I'm a 25 year old male grad in Chinese grad school. I've been teaching foreigner Chinese for years. I'm glad to help you with anything in Chinese. I'd like to ask you to be direct too (or picky), it's not my first to do language exchange, but first time by mail. I think it would be a great experience. Sorry for being late and my poor English.

All the best  
Ed

.....  
Keith to Ed 10/08/2006  
Dear Ed,

Re: loaning class notes

I would add that one of my reservations is based on personal experiences. I am 62 years old and have a B.A. in Government which I received in 1966.

When I have loaned books or personal study notes to classmates or friends, I have had a difficult time getting them back. In fact, I have loaned books to some of my best friends who NEVER returned them to me.

When in college, I loaned a class required textbook to a friend because he could not afford to buy the book. At the end of the semester, he sold it rather than returning it to me or thanking me. When I asked him to return it, he wanted to fight me.

On the other hand, I have many friends who would go miles out of their way to help me and not expect anything in return. That is what I regard to be *TRUE* friendship. I try to do the same for them.

Here in Texas, we are in the hottest part of summer. Temperatures are over 100 F almost every day and the danger of grass fires is very real.

Keith

.....  
Ed to Keith

Hi Keith: It's so lucky for me to get a epal with a B.A. dagree.I'm sorry about what you experienced. Do you have hotmail, msn, or skype account? I'd like to talk about what can I do for your Chinese. Best Sincerely Ed

.....  
Keith's email to Ed 130806

Do you have hotmail, msn, or skype account?

Thanks for your offer, but I do not currently have VOIP (skype, etc).

Again, I deeply appreciate your offer to help me with Chinese.  
At some point, I hope to be able to participate with you in learning better mandarin and perhaps helping you polish your English.  
> I'd like to talk about what can I do for your Chinese.  
The normal word order for this sentence is: I'd like to talk about what I can do for your Chinese.

The last email from Sharon (Hsieh Shin-Chieh) had an additional subject for discussion. Unfortunately, all of the email from her was lost on my server. Kindly advise me of this topic.

Best,  
Keith

## **Week 2**

Keith to Ed 140806

Ed,

Is your Bachelor's degree in languages? Is teaching Chinese a way to earn a living while pursuing your masters degree? What else do you do? like to do? Have you defined your career goals? What are your thoughts regarding reunification with the mainland or independence for Taiwan?

A brief moment when nature moves as quickly as the blink of an eye

Last week, I needed to cut down a big pine tree. The electric company "topped" the tree, i.e., cut off the upper 25'. However, the whole tree needed to be cut down. Because of its location, and remaining height approx. 26', I needed to cut it down in stages.

Because my ladder would only reach 16', I put it on my pickup. This got me to the 19' level. I partially cut the trunk, front and back. Then, I drove wedges to force it to fall away from me and then finished cutting it.

Unfortunately, it fell toward me. (I still do not understand why.) I fell from the ladder about 12' landing on my back in the bed of the pickup. The trunk fell on top of my legs, pinning them against the mangled ladder. It happened so quickly, I do not remember blinking my eyes.

Because I was alone, and could not free myself from the heavy trunk, I had some anxious moments. After analyzing the problem, I was able to start my chain saw which I apparently protected during my fall. I cut the heavy log and was able to extricate myself.

I had several bad bruises and abrasions and probably some degree of shock to my constitution, because I had a few days of feeling a bit ill. But, I am OK and hopefully, it is an adventure I will never repeat.

Even when things go wrong, we must look for the positive.

Keith

Ed to Keith 150806

Hi Keith:

Is your Bachelor's degree in languages?

(Yes, still Chinese)

Is teaching Chinese a way to earn a living while pursuing your masters degree?

(Yes! It's the way I earn my life.)

What else do you do?

(I'm part-time choir singer as well)  
like to do?

(swiming and badminton, but I'm not really good at these)

Have you defined your career goals?

(Being a scholar)

What are your thoughts regarding reunification with the mainland or independence for Taiwan?

(I stand for reunification with mainland but not immediately. )

A brief moment when nature moves as quickly as the blink of an eye. Last week, I needed to cut down a big pine tree. The electric company "topped" the tree, i.e., cut off the upper 25' (Does 25' mean 25 feet ? If it does, the pine tree is really high.)

However, the whole tree needed to be cut down. Because of its location, and remaining height approx. 26', I needed to cut it down in stages.

Because my ladder would only reach 16', I put it on my pickup. This got me to the 19' level. I partially cut the trunk, front and back. Then, I drove wedges to force it to fall away from me and then finished cutting it.

Unfortunately, it fell toward me. (I still do not understand why.) I fell from the ladder about 12' landing on my back in the bed of the pickup. The trunk fell on top of my legs, pinning them against the mangled ladder. It happened so quickly, I do not remember blinking my eyes.

Because I was alone, and could not free myself from the heavy trunk, I had some anxious moments. (I wish that I could be there.)

After analyzing the problem, I was able to start my chain saw which I apparently protected during my fall.

(What does "chain saw" mean? I don't understand it.)

I cut the heavy log and was able to extricate myself.

I had several bad bruises and abrasions and probably some degree of shock to my constitution, because I had a few days of feeling a bit ill. But, I am OK and hopefully, it is an adventure I will never repeat. Even when things go wrong, we must look for the positive. (Thank for telling this. I'll keep it inside my mind.)

take care

Ed

.....

Keith to Ed 160806

Dear Ed,

(Does 25' mean 25 feet ? If it does, the pine tree is really high.) Yes, it WAS

really tall. Yes. 1'= one foot, 25'=twenty-five feet. (foot is singular, feet is plural, single quotation mark ' is an abbreviation for feet, whereas double quotation mark " is an abbreviation for inches. If referring to the arc of a circle the terms are degrees, minutes, seconds. In this case ' = minutes, " = seconds.

(What does "chain saw" mean? I don't understand it.) A chainsaw has cutting teeth mounted on a chain which is driven by a gear (sprocket) powered by a small gasoline engine or it can be powered by an electric motor—but that requires an extension cord from a power outlet. see picture: <http://wisesales.com/HuskyChainsaws.html>

In English, we normally use the term "lady" to refer to a woman of good character (high morals, good manners, proper dress). Is the term shu1nu3 the closest mandarin translation?

Kindest wishes,  
Keith

### **Week 3**

Keith to Ed 230806

Here in the U.S. friendship is generally viewed as a social relationship between two people which does not carry with it expectation of financial or material benefit. Some who have visited mainland China have said that, friendship is viewed as a means to achieve personal gain/benefit as opposed to being a mere social relationship.

Within the meaning of friendship here, if I need help, I might ask a friend to assist me. Depending on the friendship, he probably would not expect financial reward. However, at some point, if he needed help and asked me, he would expect my assistance and I would feel obligated to help him.

Could you define what you view as the norm for friendship in Taiwan? and if you have a view of this issue, for mainland China?

Today, it looks like the temperature here will fail to reach 100 F for the first time in over a month.

Best,  
Keith

.....

Ed to Keith 270806

Dear Keith:

Sorry for being late, but you really gave me a big question. I thought about it recent days but it's really hard to give you a clear and organized answer about my definition of friendship, so I haven't clarified it yet, the only thing that I can say is some of my opinion and feelings:

For me, friendship is not only social relationship but also emotional relationship. I consider that people need many kinds of emotional satisfaction, such as family love,



friendship, love and even partnership. I 'm agree with you about friendship is a kind of tacit agreement of mutual aid, but for me and other Asians it must include emotional base. I still remember that my textbook in senior high school said "occidentals place importance on individual, oriental place importance on community." when it talked about the differences between west and east culture. I've been suffered from the difference for few years, and I'm still to make tit through. It's got pretty much better now.

After the Culture Revolution, Chinese culture in Mainland China had deteriorated pretty much. The relationship between people had changed. Family system and classic ethic had destroyed by many social movements. Recent years, they tried fixed it, but thing can't be how it was anymore. The influence will remain.

Again, sorry for being late and what is unclear in this mail. I think that I didn't use some words well in this mail. Hope you come understand what it says.

All the best

Sincerely Ed

.....

Dear Keith , are you Black ?

Ed to Keith 270806

Dear Keith:

Because you live in Texas, I assume that you're Caucasian. (Sorry for my prejudice. I really don't know United States well.) If you're Black, is there any difficulty for you to live in the south of United States? Racism problem have been getting serious in Taiwan these years. (The provincialism problem in Taiwan we call it "sheng3 ji2 qing2 jie2" It's about the complexes and conflicts between the immigrants who came from Mainland 400 years ago, and the new immigrants in 1947. ) The original reason is the wrong policies from KMT when they just took Taiwan back from Japan. But it's getting serious because some politicians inspired it to make use of it for they own political benefit.

Not only provincialism problem, as the amount of foreigners getting bigger in Taiwan, the racism of Taiwanese but also has been appearing. Taiwanese really go for Caucasians. Let me make you an example: In Taiwan, it's much harder for African Americans to get a job as an English teacher than Caucasians, even than Caucasian from German, Poland .....etc..

Not only Taiwanese, but also Japanese have this complex. Recently one of my Japanese students has tried to answer my question in English. I keep clarifying that they come to me for Chinese, if they want to speak English with me, they really pick the wrong guy, because speaking English with me wouldn't improve their English ability.....

We Asians always blamed westerner for racial discriminations, however sometime the discriminations are not from western world, but the western fever. Although I've been seeing these things keeping happening for years, but I still cannot help feeling sad about it....

Hope talking about it more deeply with you.

#### **Week 4**

Keith to Ed 280806

Dear Ed,

1) When that tree fell on me I was black and blue and green where my body bruised. But yes, I am Caucasian. Both my parent are of Czech ancestry.

2) People in the U.S. are hypersensitive on the subject of race. It actually prevents open and honest discussion of differences, attitudes, practices and perceptions.

I have been in the position to see whether racial discrimination was a factor in employment decisions and only saw evidence of it one time. It may occur, but if it were prevalent, it would have occurred more than that.

In the U.S. we are very goal oriented. In business, the goal by which success is measured is whether a business makes a profit. The social pressure of racist attitudes which required or allowed businesses, in the past, to discriminate based on race seems to have fallen by the wayside. Not only is racial employment discrimination illegal, it is bad business. Companies want to hire the individual who can do the best job and make them the most money.

I have read on some of the internet chat rooms that Asians (who participate in those internet chat rooms) are convinced that there is racial discrimination.

I know that post-Vietnam War, when many Vietnamese came to the U.S. they brought different values on what was acceptable business practices and they felt that they were discriminated against because of race. However, the real friction was not based on race.

For example, many were fishermen or shrimpers. On the coast there were unwritten rules to avoid over-harvesting the seafood in the bays. The purpose was to allow the shrimp, for example, to grow for another season to assure that next season there would be an ample supply to be caught. Whether the Vietnamese immigrants were doing what they had always done or whether they were under such severe need to feed their families, I do not know. But, it did cause friction.

3) Re: Taiwan older established Taiwanese and post 1947 immigrants.

This is interesting. We sometimes hear of a social phenomenon here in the U.S. where an established social elite (sometimes based on family and community heritage) treat successful transplants as socially unworthy, not good enough to join the "best social circles or clubs".

I can relate a true example. When the current CEO of AT&T became head of (what was then) Southwestern Bell Telephone, he was regarded as an outsider. The company headquarters was in St. Louis, Missouri. He was from Texas. He could not join the country club to play golf because he did not have the "old, established family ties to THE community social circles".

So, he moved the headquarters to San Antonio, Texas. Every time I think about it, I laugh.

Best,

Keith

## **Week 5**

first email Ed to Keith 050906

Dear Keith:

About this question, you did it right. "shu2 niu3" really means that. But "shu2" is second tone, not first tone. Besides "shu2 nius" is not for addressing people. If you want to addressing a lady, you should say "xiao3 jie3"

hope it would be helpful to you.

Ed

## **Week 6**

Keith to Ed 13/09/06

Dear Ed,

I was somewhat surprised by your email journal in which you made the following statement:

*The pattern of friendship of Westerner and Asian are so different. It's really hard to get along with people, especially with people from different culture. As an Asian, I consider that the same culture is a very important base to communicate with people. The culture created a ambit and people who live inside communicate with each other by a kind of special language "manner" .*

*In Asia (especially the east part ) people understand each other's mind by the things they do, but not the words they say. The behaviors are just like vowels and consonants, and the manners are the language. When the vowels and consonants combine to be a kind of language, then the meaning appears.*

*The only way to completely understand this complicated system is understand the culture.*

We are certainly judged by the way we handle things, especially with friends, not merely by the words we speak. Certainly one aspect of friendship is the emotional bond to which you previously referred.

There are apparently many nuances of social behavior among Chinese of which I am ignorant. Perhaps actions are interpreted through symbolism developed in the culture. I would need specific examples to begin to understand some of the differences. **If you have time, write about a couple of real life scenarios that illustrate your experiences.**

I think the traditional American mindset is straight talk tempered with (more or less) consideration for the feelings of the other person. However, there has been a coarsening of personal conduct over the last 30 years. People in the U.S. are less friendly, less courteous, and less considerate today. Then there is always the issue of integrity. Is this person being honest/sincere with me? Or are they devious and looking for an "edge" (undeserved advantage gained through manipulation)?

Bear in mind that every culture from the world is present in America. This means we cannot rely on the customs brought from the country of origin. We must all meld to some practical standard which is always evolving. It must rely more on communication than on nuance, although non-verbal communication can be a clue as to how one interprets a comment or action.

To make America work, there used to be an unwritten code of conduct. Leave your "baggage" (ethnic, religious, and racial rivalries and animosities in your former homeland. And be mindful that if part your culture is incompatible with U.S. culture, it is in your interest to adjust. )

Increasingly, this is not the case and deeper divisions are forming in the U.S. It is truly mind-boggling the degree of differences in customs and laws across the world. As a student, one of my professors studied international law. He noted that in one tribe in Africa, if a man came across two men fighting in the jungle, he was legally required to assist the man who was being defeated, even if it meant fighting against (and killing) his own brother.

I list this example, to illustrate the potential gulf which exists between cultures. Without being judgmental of them, it is important to understand that some aspects of two cultures can be absolutely incompatible.

**Thank you for your thoughts on the issue of friendship, and if you have time, please forward some specific examples of how a Chinese friendship would function differently from friendship among Westerners.**

Best wishes from Texas,

Keith

.....

Keith to Ed 16/09/06

I did not expect this 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9-11 attack on America to be an emotional experience for me. I was busy and actually avoided the memorial events which were on TV. However, just a recap of the evening news brought it all back to the forefront of my being.

It is still incomprehensible for me to admit that there are people who want to kill me simply because they disagree with me. Many people across the world face this same challenge as the "religious fanatics" strike in countries whether ruled by democracy or dictatorial regime.

It is more difficult for those who live in democracies to accept. We are expected to respect those who are different, who have different ideas, different religion. We agree to disagree in a peaceful manner, and to settle our differences within the law and at the ballot box.

Each day, I go into the world with the firm resolve: "Today is a good day to die" and I worry no more. It is said that a coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave die but once. I choose the latter.

Ni de pengyou,

Keith

Ed to Keith 16/09/06

Keith

I'll be a temporary teacher in a language center for three weeks. It's really a challenge. I've never taught students from different countries all at the same time and yesterday was the first day. Fortunately all the students are from Latin American and non from Brazil. We can communicate in English and a little bit of Spanish. The difficulty was that none of the students had textbook in hand. It made me nervous, so the only thing that I could do is to explain the Chinese vocabularies and sentences in English.

Actually, if I could completely control the situation, I didn't wouldn't have said anything in English. Next week, I'll meet the Latin students again and another class. Wish me good luck!

About your letter, I'm sorry to say: "It really made me feel disappointed."

Your attitude in the mail really expressed the prejudice of Americans.

Thus my thoughts:

People said that people without international viewpoint are Americans. I agree with it only at times. Democracy is a really a great contribution from occidental to the whole world, and I so agree that United States is one of the most democratic country in the world. However, after all, democracy is something from Western World. Nobody can assume that it would work everywhere. I had a roommate from United States, a fiery – spirited guy who is eager to promot democracy to the world. But have you ever thought that people in different countries, different cultures, need different political systems? I agree that logically, democracy is the fairest politic system so far and most of countries in the world try to put it into practice. Do you know that McDonalds sells hamburger to the world, but they still sell hamburgers that made of rice in Taiwan? Do you consider that American is always the way?

About the religious fanatic, do you really think they just attacked United States for your different viewpoint? I don't really know what American soldiers have done in Middle East, but what I knew from the TV was, when the world trade was attacked. Muslim children were dancing and singing on the street. Why even the children got inspired from the attack? Do they like to see people get hurt? Or they have been really bored for a long time? (Maybe since they were born) If someone does the same thing to you, no, matter how angry you would be, sometimes you may think: "what did I do to make you hate me so much?"

Sorry for didn't comfort you about the 911, but as your friend, I'd like to tell you what are my true thoughts and feelings. So many people asked me, as a Chinese major, why I always make foreign friends. "If you want a globalized world but not just westernized world, we need some orient horizon.

Your friend from different world, Ed

Keith to Ed 17/09/06

Dear Ed,

Your attitude in the mail really expressed the prejudice of Americans.

I do not know what you are referring to. Kindly specify.

Like many people across the world, your email indicates an unwillingness to accept the fact that the religious fanatics wish to kill everyone who disagrees with them—including you and me. They do kill fellow Muslims who do not practice the

Muslim faith in the same way. They kill Muslims who come to reject the religion. They openly say that “compromise” is not possible in their view of Islam. Just as we judge friends by word and deed, we must also judge enemies by what they say and what they do. To put this issue in perspective: Last year there were about 11,000 terrorists attacks across the world with about 4,200 occurring OUTSIDE Iraq.

This is World War III. What makes it difficult to recognize is that the terrorists, though they have state sponsors like Iran, they are not a nation or a state. It is a battle defined by ideology (religious fanaticism) v. the rest of the world.

Americans often say that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.

9-11 put an exclamation point on 60 years of failed foreign policies in the middle-east.

For the most part, those policies entailed working with and respecting middle-eastern institutions of government (even though only the government of Israel is a stable democracy in the region.)

The Iraq war is a clear departure from those policies. Its goal is to transform the middle-east through some form of locally determined democracy. **It is not necessary for the U.S. and Coalition forces to win. But it IS absolutely essential to the terrorists that transformational democracy not occur.**

Who do you think will prevail? I still believe in the common sense and character of the Iraqi people. But, I expect the larger conflict to last for at least 20-50 years, long after Coalition forces have left Iraq.

The fact is that for democracy to survive, it requires great effort, vigilance and involvement of the people to defend the rights inherent in democracy. If they do not exercise these responsibilities, the democracy will fall into authoritarian rule very quickly.

Your premise that the U.S. or the West can impose “Western” democracy is erroneous. The most that anyone can do is provide the opportunity for democracy. What form it takes or whether it survives is up to the people. However, we promote democracy because the voting public prefers to vote against war and because along with democracy usually comes greater economic prosperity which also promotes peace.

Some of your comments regarding cultural difference simply illustrates that “local determination” to which the West alludes is consistent with your thoughts that “McDonalds sells a hamburger made of rice in Taiwan”. However, the question of whether democracy can work in the “non-western” world is gradually being settled as Asian and African nations develop their own democratic traditions, ex. Japan, South Korea, the Phillipines, and former Soviet states.

As for TV showing Muslim children celebrating the death of thousands of people in the World Trade Center attack, I would make two points: 1) no one claims that those

celebrations were representative of the Muslim world and 2) due to the language barrier, few in the middle-east get to hear a balanced version of news and events which would dissuade such ignorant and callous conduct. They simply do not know the facts.

Many have been told that it was an attack by Jews and they see it as a fissure between Israel and the U.S., even though BinLaden claims to be behind the attacks. Others still believe it was done by the Jews to bring the U.S. into war against Muslim nations.

Re: your approach to teaching Chinese. There may be people for whom the immersion method works. Unfortunately, it is a most discouraging waste of time for me. Wishing you success in your teaching.

Joke:

The kindergarten teacher tells all the kids to draw a picture of anything they want. After a few minutes she goes around the room inspecting the art work.

"Alice, what are you drawing," the teacher asks.

"A picture of God," Alice replies.

"But, no one knows what God looks like!" the teacher exclaims.

Alice confidently responds, "They will when I finish."

Kindest wishes,  
Keith

## **Week 7**

Ed to Keith 18/09/06

Hi Keith

How are you?

I have question.

You're a English major, so I think you definetly know about it well.

In many cultures, the gods of sun are lame.

but the Apollo in Greek myth is not.

One of my friend told me that his carter is.

Could tell me the reason as to why he is lame?

Much Gratitude

Sincerely

Ed

.....  
Keith to Ed 18/09/02

1) I hold a B.A. with a major in government, not English.

2) Neither I nor my wife, know the answer to your question. We were both unaware that Apollo was lame. I found the following on [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org):

In Greek and Roman mythology, **Apollo** (Ancient Greek Ἀπόλλων, *Apóllōn*; or Ἀπέλλων, *Apellōn*), the ideal of the *kouros*, was the archer-god of medicine and healing and also a bringer of death-dealing plague; as the leader of the Muses (*Apollon Musagetes*) and director of their choir, he is a god of music and poetry. Hymns sung to Apollo were called Paeans.

If he were the God of healing, one would not expect him to be lame.

Best,  
Keith

---

Ed to Keith 190906

Keith:

Thank you so much

Xie Xie

Ed

### **Week 8**

Keith to Ed 28/09/06

Do you think Chinese culture is compatible with a republican (representative democracy) form of government?

I have always thought so, but many Chinese I have met seem to have serious reservations about whether it would work.

It seems to me that the greatest test for representative democracy is in middle-eastern Asia. In the so-called Arab world, there is no word in their language for "compromise".

To achieve majority support, compromise is necessary because there are as many approaches to a problem as there are people. Forging a practical solution (consensus) depends on compromise.

---

Ed to Keith 29/09/06

I think you got the point. Actually, I have to confess that I don't like people who never negotiate with people. But why they do so? I have some friends from Iraq. They are friendly guys. There must be some reason to make them like this when they face diplomatic affairs. I don't think that Chinese culture is compatible with a republican, but I don't think that they match to each other perfectly. Democracy in Western world is a really model to learn, but we should try to create a system of ourselves, but just follow Western world step by step.

Got to go, talk to you later.

---

Keith to Ed 29/09/06

What aspects of Chinese culture do you feel would be obstacles to or incompatible with representative democracy?



**Week 9**

Keith to Ed 06/10/06

The way I gain insight into different cultures is through understanding the logic behind a particular practice or viewpoint. Cultural practices and beliefs are based on deeply held values and traditions. I fully expect them to be different from my own views and culture. However, through understanding, common threads can be identified which brings us closer, even if we are geographically far apart.

I had hoped that participation in this exchange would help me to better understand the Chinese people and their culture.

I have not gotten this benefit.

I will be not be able to receive emails again before October 15.

## Appendix 9

### Prompts for e-journals

**Week1:** Have you found something interesting about your epal?

**Week 2:** "Have you encountered any difficulties so far?"

**Week 3:** How much time do you need to write one email to your epal?  
Do you need any preparations before writing the emails to your epal?

**Week 4:** After this month, do you know more about your epal?  
What else would you like to find out about your epal?

**Week 5:** So far, what do you think is the most popular topic(s) in your email correspondence with your epal? Why do you like to talk about the topic(s)?

**Week 6:** Do you use emotive icons, i.e. ☺ ☹, in your emails?  
If yes, when and why do you use them? If not, why don't you use them?  
In your opinion, are there any topics which should be avoid in your email interactions with your epal?

**Week 7:** If you asked your epal a question and he/she did not answer that question, what would you suppose that has happened?  
What would you do then?

**Week 8:** Have you encountered a situation when you epal asks you a question to which you are reluctant to respond? If yes, what did you do?  
If no, what would you do if the situation occurs?

**Week 9:** When you are not sure about what your epal meant, either linguistically or culturally, would you interpret the meaning based on your own knowledge, or would you ask your epal to explain the meaning for you? Why?

**Week 10:** change it to an open question:  
In your opinion, what are the values of virtual interaction? How are the values similar or dissimilar to real life interaction?  
In your opinion, is the value of virtual interaction similar to, less than or more than the real life interaction?

**Week 11:** In virtual interaction, would knowing the gender or age of your counterpart make a difference when you talk to him/she?  
In real life interaction, would knowing the gender or age of your counterpart make a difference when you talk to him/her?

**Week 12:** If you have friends from other countries, do you find interacting with your epal is different from or similar to the interactions with your friends from other countries in real life?  
If you do not have friends from other countries, do you find that the process of interacting with your epal is just what you would have imagined?